A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

ANC

15¢

OCT.

FEATURING

Riders OF THE SHADOW TRAIL

A Wayne Morgan Novel

By D. B. NEWTON

NOBODY'S GOATS

A Cactus County Story

By L. P. HOLMES

THRILLING!

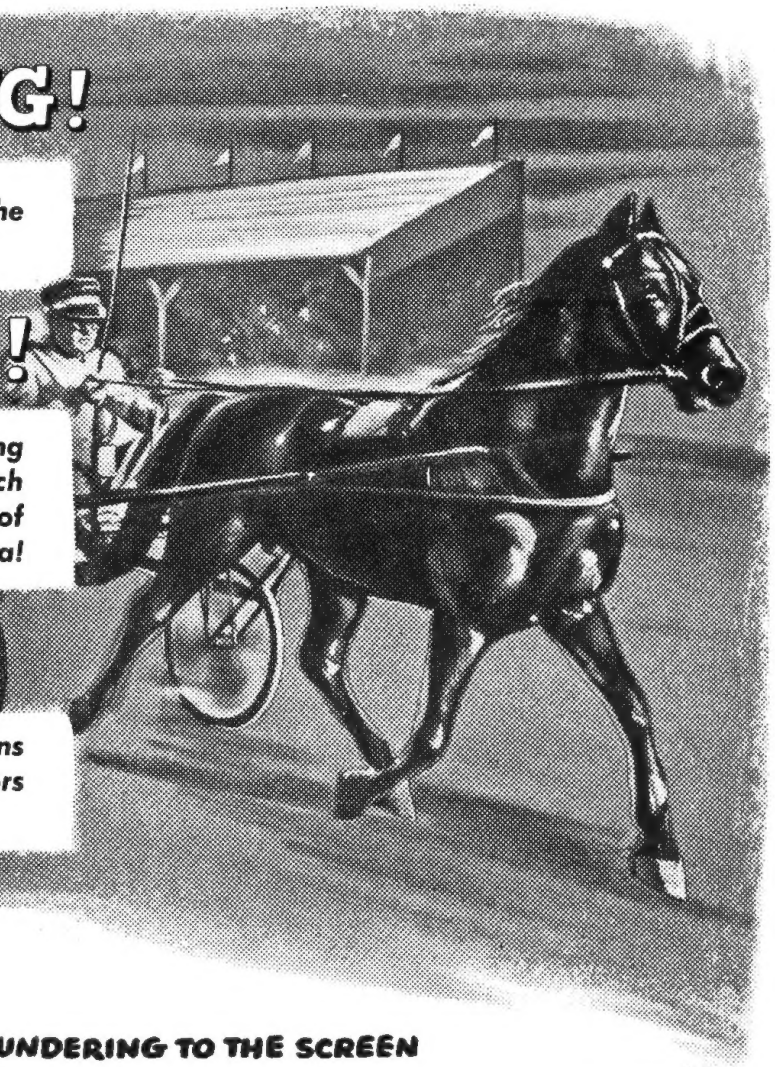
SEE *Dan Patch break the world's record at 1:55!*

TERRIFIC!

FEEL *the heart-pounding excitement as Dan Patch makes a triumphal tour of wildly-cheering America!*

TRUE!

THRILL *as Dan Patch wins the greatest sports honors of his time!*



THUNDERING TO THE SCREEN

COMES THE FABULOUS STORY OF THE MOST FAMOUS PACER IN HISTORY!

W. R. Frank's presents

"THE GREAT DAN PATCH"

starring

DENNIS O'KEEFE · GAIL RUSSELL · RUTH WARRICK · CHARLOTTE GREENWOOD

with HENRY HULL · JOHN HOYT · Arthur Hunnicutt · Clarence Muse

Written and Directed by JOHN TAINTOR FOOTE · Executive Producer W. R. FRANK · Directed by JOE NEWMAN

Released thru United Artists

Here is a romance to match the blazing excitement of some of the greatest sports thrills ever filmed!

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $3,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then more difficult ones. If you could do this—and could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex — soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained*. It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

Over 2800 Certified Public Accountants among LaSalle alumni

Write For This Free Book

For your own good, don't put off investigation of *all* the facts. Write for our free 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." It'll prove that accountancy offers brilliant futures to those who aren't afraid of serious home study. We'll also include "Ten Years' Promotion in One"—a book which has helped many men. Send us the coupon *now*.

LASALLE EXTENSION
CHICAGO 5, ILL.

Other LaSalle Opportunities

- ☐ Higher Accountancy
- ☐ C.P.A. Coaching
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Law: LL.B. Degree
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Industr'l Management
- ☐ Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

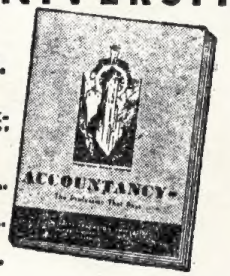
417 S. Dearborn St. Dept. 10329-HR Chicago 5, Ill.

I want to be an accountant. Send me without obligation, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays"—also "Ten Years Promotion in One."

Name.....*Age*.....

Address.....

City, Zone & State.....



MASKED RIDER WESTERN

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

Vol. XXVI, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION October, 1949

COMPLETE NOVEL

Riders of the Shadow Trail

by D. B. Newton

While fighting to smash the weird conspiracy surrounding the imperilled Horseshoe Ranch, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk strive to solve a grim mystery that stalks the Sunstone Hills! **9**

SHORT STORIES

PADLOCK PILGRIMAGE *by Ed La Vanway* **58**
Lovable scamp Tobias Toogle uses his bag of tricks to bring a showdown

PAYDAY BRAWL *by Raley Brien* **67**
Tough cowboys aren't enough to keep lawman Swinton from doing his duty

NOBODY'S GOATS *by L. P. Holmes* **77**
Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly prove their mettle when a stagecoach is robbed

EXPIATION *by Harold Helfer* **87**
The tall, clear-eyed stranger met his fate—with a smile on his lips!

FEATURES

TRAIL TALK *by Foghorn Clancy* **6**
A department for readers conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

CACTUS CRUSADE *by Leslie Ernenwein* **54**
The exciting true story of the exploits of Mossman's Arizona Rangers!

MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1949, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), $1.80; single copies, 15 cents. Foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter January 20, 1948, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution be used it is a coincidance. Printed in the U.S.A.

USE IT OR LOSE IT!

Veterans:

This lifeline has a *deadline!* Grasp it and you're on your way to greater job security, more responsible work, higher pay. Delay and you're apt to lose out. For training under the G. I. Bill is a limited offer. To benefit you've got to *act.*

You have 400 famous I.C.S. Courses to choose from. The coupon brings full information. Take a minute *right now* to check the course that interests *you.*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3970-P, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ French
- ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing
- ☐ Retail Store Management
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Ship Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake
- ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric
- ☐ Steam Engineer

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Length of Service in World War II_____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

A Department for Readers Conducted by

FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

GREETINGS, waddies, throw your twine on a cayuse, get 'em saddled and we will be off on another trail jaunt and of course there will be plenty of trail talk, as there is always plenty to talk about as we head westward over the trails once traversed by the pioneers who went West in search of new homes, a new life, fortunes and adventure. Not all of them found new life, as many died on the way, not all of them found fortunes, but all found adventure, and today as we whiz over the wide paved thoroughfares westward in our high powered cars going as far in an hour as the old covered wagons of the pioneers used to be able to go in three or four tedious days, if we look back to those old days we will consider our trip an adventure.

Let's travel out the old Santa Fe Trail, to the land of enchantment, to a section where it is claimed that every weed has a flower. It is one of the oldest sections of these United States, yet one of the youngest states, for it has enjoyed statehood only 37 years, but its attractions are so many and varied that it is rightfully called The Land of Enchantment. New Mexico is this state, rich in tradition and romance, rich in scenic beauty and rich in legends and tales of the Old West.

Secret of the Indians

When the Indians first entered the Southwest, or from whence they came, is still a secret that archaeologists and ethnologists have as yet been unable to solve.

At the time William the Conquerer was invading England, the Indians were in their golden age of pueblo construction, which began in 900 and flourished for three hundred years. Great and impressive ruins of these immense community dwellings, often containing more than a thousand rooms, may still be seen. Later examples of pueblo architecture are still standing and in daily use by the Indians at Taos and other pueblos.

This amazing race of people lived out their lives on the plains and valleys of the land which was later to become New Mexico. They evolved a drama, a religion and a system of government so advanced that they were called savages only because they had not developed a written language.

In 1536 a white man first saw the country of the pueblos when Cabeza de Vaca and his companions, following untold hardships, struggled across the southern mesas to complete their long journey, a transcontinental walk from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts. The stories of riches and gold they had heard during their wanderings led to the expedition of 1540 by Coronado. This expedition is regarded by historians as one of the most remarkable in all history.

Ruthlessly Coronado conquered the country, writing his deeds in letters of blood. He penetrated as far north as Nebraska, but found no gold.

The Advent of Horses

Historians also claim that there were no horses in America until Coronado came over with horses, large horses from Spain, bred to carry soldiers weighted with armour, and that many of these horses either got away from the company, or were turned loose, thus forming the first herd of wild horses in America, horses which ran wild for three or more centuries, and were first caught up by the Indians and the very first settlers and made beasts of burden.

For forty years after the coming of Coronado there was quiet, then Don Antonio de Espejo, an explorer of a different temperament, led a few soldiers across the plains and mountains, and everywhere he went peace accompanied him.

Such fertile land as was contained in what is now New Mexico, such a glorious country could not long go unsettled. In 1598 Juan de Onate brought a band of colonists to northern New Mexico where they settled at San Gabriel.

In 1609 Don Pedro de Peralta was designated Governor by the viceroy who instructed him to move the Capital. The move was made from San Gabriel to its present site about 1610. The new city was called La Villa Real de Santa Fe de San Francisco. The name was later shortened to Santa Fe.

Affairs of government were conducted at the Palace of Governors, a building erected between 1610 and 1614 which is still well preserved and now houses the Museum of New Mexico.

Years of Peace

For a few years there was peace. The padres, who always followed the Spanish soldiers, were so energetic that by 1633 they had built ninety churches. Many of these missions still stand and are in daily use. Ruins of others may be seen and are sought out by many tourists visiting the state.

But peace could not last. In 1680 the Indian, Pope, a native of San Juan, led the Pueblo Indian Rebellion which was so successful that 400 Spaniards were slain and the remainder, nearly 2,000, were driven from the country.

It was not until 1692 that Indian rule was crushed. Don Diego de Vargas Zapata Lujan Ponce de Leon penetrated to Santa Fe, obtained promise of obedience, then withdrew for the winter. He was compelled in 1693 to use force to end the uprising. Many precious records were destroyed during these bloody years, causing historians no end of worry in fixing dates of early happenings.

The revolution in 1822, which gave Mexico her freedom from Spain, opened the gates to commerce with the United States and merchandise flowed west over the Santa Fe Trail.

General Kearny entered Santa Fe in 1846,

(Continued on page 89)

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6

Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint.

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.
Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days' free trial. If OK I will remit $1 in 7 days and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. —Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

Name_____

Address_____

Occupation_____

Employed by_____ PAL

SHINE WITHOUT 'POLISH'

New Invention! • Sells Like Wild

Replaces messy pastes, liquids. Simply glide over shoes—and PRESTO! —you have a lustrous, long-lasting shine. No mess. No muss. No soiled hands. Clean. Handy. WORKS LIKE MAGIC! For Men's, Women's and Children's Shoes. Low priced. Lightning seller!

SAMPLES FOR AGENTS Sample offer sent immediately to all who send name at once. A penny postal will do. SEND NO MONEY—just your name. KRISTEE CO., 1487 Bar Street, AKRON, OHIO

Start Full or Spare Time Business at Home

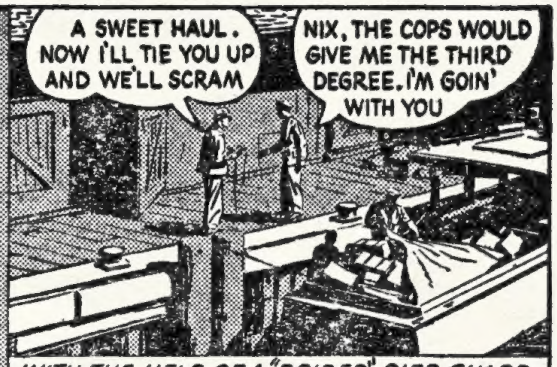
METALIZE BABY SHOES for BIG STEADY PROFITS

No waiting. Cash can start coming in very first day. Money making WARNER SUCCESS PLAN shows every step. Learn quickly, easily without previous training or experience. Plan backed by old established company. Your home is your headquarters. This is too good to pass up since facts cost nothing—now or ever. Don't wait. Send name and address on postcard today to Ray Brandell, Mgr.

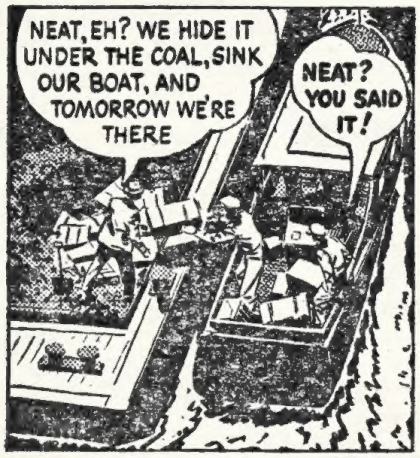
WARNER ELECTRIC CO.,
1512 Jarvis Avenue Dept. 2410 Chicago 26, Illinois

FREE
OFFER of COMPLETE Money Making Success Plan
We show you how to start—how to get orders rolling in...how to do the work; how to pyramid your profits.
Send No Money
Just your name and address on Postcard.

BERT OUTSMARTS RIVER PIRATES WHEN...



WITH THE HELP OF A "BRIBED" PIER GUARD, THE RIVER PIRATES PREPARE TO MAKE OFF WITH A PRIZE HAUL...

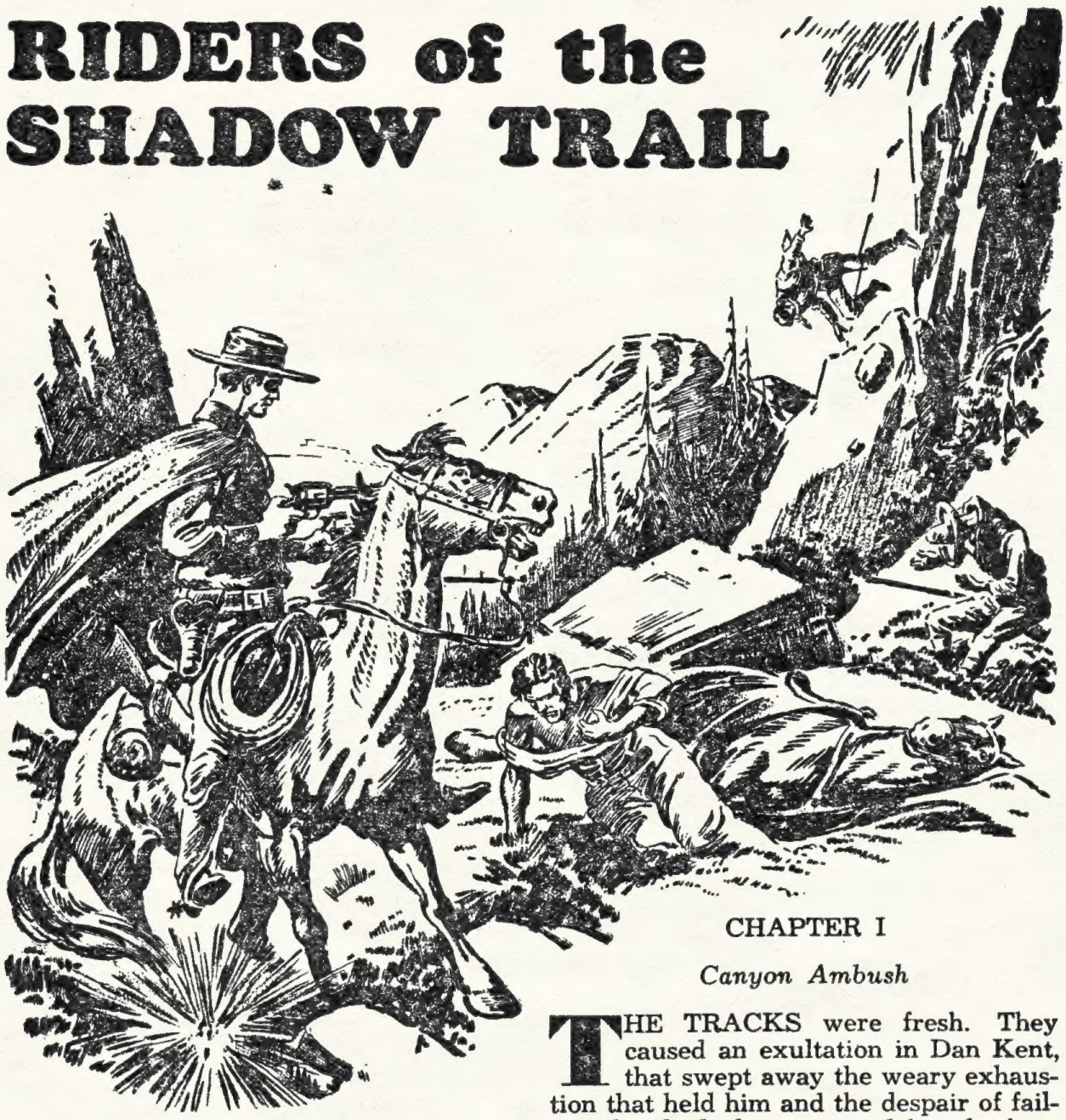


YOU'VE SAVED MR. ELKTON'S FIRM A LOT OF MONEY, WALDEN...
— AND EARNED YOURSELF A FAT REWARD
HANDSOME AND ALERT. I CAN USE A MAN LIKE THAT

ENJOY GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AND SAVE MONEY, TOO. **USE THIN GILLETTES... THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD.** THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM NICKS, AND IRRITATION AS WELL, FOR THEY'RE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE

NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

RIDERS of the SHADOW TRAIL



a Wayne Morgan novel

by D. B. NEWTON

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk battle to solve a grim mystery that stalks the Sunstone Hills!

CHAPTER I

Canyon Ambush

THE TRACKS were fresh. They caused an exultation in Dan Kent, that swept away the weary exhaustion that held him and the despair of failure that had almost turned him back at this point in his hundred-mile ordeal.

He knelt in the dirt, put his fingers into the prints of unshod hoofs, and knew from the ease with which the sharp edges crumbled under his touch that the tracks could have been made no more than half an hour before. Even in the windless stillness of the draw, their shapes would have blurred before long with the constant sliding and shifting of the sand particles.

Dan Kent had done the impossible. He had taken up a cold trail and had held to it. Followed it across half a state now, in the heart of the Sunstone hills, he was

treading on the very heels of the outlaws who had stolen his prize string of forty purebred Morgan mares!

He stood up and turned to his mount, forcing action from a body seemingly on the verge of collapse. There had been no rest for him on this trail, hardly even any time to snatch a mouthful of grub when the clamor of his empty stomach demanded it. His young face was grimy, gaunted, beard-stubbled; his shirt torn where thorny brush had caught it, and plastered with sweat and dirt.

But the fire of battle shone in red-rimmed and aching eyes, and Dan Kent shifted the belt and holster at his hip so that the ancient, wooden-handled Colt would be ready for blunt, rope-scarred fingers.

Retribution lay just ahead, and in his eagerness to settle the score with the scar-faced leader of the men who had stolen his mares, the young horse rancher was forgetful of everything else—caution, hunger, and bone-deep weariness itself.

He twisted the stirrup and lifted into saddle, sweat-lathered bay gelding bracing itself against the sag of his weight. It was the third bronc he had worn out in this desperate, killing trek, and when he settled into leather and ticked its hide with blunt spur rowels, the tired beast stood where it was for a long moment, head drooping, before it lifted its hoofs and went plodding tiredly up the throat of the draw. Dan Kent gave the sweaty neck a friendly, encouraging slap.

"Sorry," he grunted through dust-caked lips. "But it ain't gonna be much longer. It can't be!"

Heat and silence rode the air about him. The weight of the sun was punishing. It was slipping westward now, down toward the jagged, blocky lifts of the broken land. But until it dropped from view, there would be no relief from its heat or from the eye-aching glare of its reflected light.

For these were the Sunstones—a barren, broken region of eroded granite and lava, place of canyons and pockets of naked rock where countless facets of quartz crystal beat back the sun's rays in millions of tiny mirrors, giving the badlands their name. In the dancing, shifting glare it was difficult to trace the outlines of rock and crevasse. A man rode here with slitted eyes, grateful for any brief respite of shadow from the glare.

But the trail Dan Kent followed pointed clearly ahead, farther into the heart of the maze. The fact was puzzling enough, and he pushed on up the draw with tension singing along his nerves, not knowing at what moment he might come upon his enemies.

He came out of the draw, topped a ridge. Below lay the entrance of a steep-walled canyon. Plenty of shadow there. An inward voice spoke to him in that moment, warning him; but sight of the torn earth and the clear tracks pointing directly into that mouth of rock spurred him past caution.

He drove straight forward. The canyon walls lifted now on either hand; his gelding's iron rang from bare stone. And suddenly the first shot came—from *behind* him!

Right hand grabbing for six-gun, Dan Kent started to slide around in saddle. He caught a glimpse of a dark, steeple-hatted figure. Then, on the tail of the first shot, another lashed across the breathless air. Somewhere ahead, that second rifle. And Dan Kent felt the impact of the bullet strike the horse between his knees, was kicking free of stirrups as the beast spilled down lifeless.

KENT hit the solid rock flooring and lay dazed a moment. The noise of the shots rocketed back and forth and faded out farther along the high canyon walls. One thought pounded through his numbed brain: *He had overridden them!* They had learned he was following and had laid a trap, and here he was, with his enemies ahead of him and at his back. Whipsawed—one against a half dozen hardcases.

His saddle gun lay beyond reach, under the body of the horse. But he had his six-gun and he brought it up now, snapped a shot toward that figure at the mouth of the canyon.

It missed, but it brought a startled yell, and then a heavy voice was bawling: "He ain't dead! Finish him!" And bullets from

Surrounding the Imperilled Horseshoe Ranch!

four hidden guns began crashing into the rocks, all about the prone figure of the horse rancher.

There was no escape. They had him surrounded, firing from the rocks and brush that flanked the walls of the canyon.

But there was fighter blood in young Dan Kent and he was not licked easily. The only cover of any sort was the stiffening body of the fallen gelding, and he went rolling for this, flung himself close against its back and began emptying his gun at the flashes of the weapons that had him trapped.

A slug struck his saddle, made a long, raw groove in the leather and whanged off the rocks inches from his head. He ducked, triggered again and saw one of those shadowy figures duck wildly. It was growing dusky here in the depths of the canyon, a hint of coolness coming into the breathless air. The sun must be low behind the Sunstones, now.

Out there in the world of the living, range folks were waiting for the night which came as reward after the long, hot, daylight hours. But Dan Kent knew with a chill certainty that he would never live to see the stars come out in the sky that stretched there between the high walls of the canyon. For the hammer of his six-gun pronged against a spent shell, and the ambushers would surely not give him time to reload.

He twisted, reaching desperately for the brass in the loops of his gun-belt. He fumbled, thumbing the cartridges into his rope-scarred palm. And then the bullet took him.

WAYNE MORGAN

It caught him in the side, slammed him hard against the earth. The gun slipped from his fingers, the shells in his other hand tinkling brightly against the rocks. Pain took him in a terrible grip, blooming within his body. Blindly, he thought:

Does it hurt this much to die?

Suddenly, through the creeping numbness, he heard a new sound above the gun echoes and the yells of triumph that had broken from his enemies as they saw the

bullet strike. This, too, was a yell, but it seemed strangely different from the rest. It carried something like terror in it.

Kent opened his eyes. Lying on his back that way, he could look straight up at the paling sky above the canyon rim. And through a reddish haze that seemed to film his vision, he saw an amazing thing.

Was that a man, up there—a man who sat astride a powerful-bodied stallion? Yes, Kent could see him etched against the sky as he poised motionless for a long instant, looking down. But there was something odd about the shape of that mounted figure.

Suddenly, as the great black horse stepped forward, Kent saw there was a cape which flowed from the powerful shoulders of the man. And even before the last rays of the setting sun touched the face beneath the brim of the black sombrero and showed him the shadow of a mask that covered its upper half, the truth dawned upon the hurt man.

He knew the identity of this strange, half-legendary figure who had so unexpectedly appeared. He heard again the cry of terror, heard it echo the name that had leaped into his own pain-tortured mind: "The Masked Rider!"

Then the black stallion upon the rim leaped forward, almost as though his rider meant to send him plummeting down into the canyon's depths. But there proved to be a break in the wall at that point, a dangerous shelving ledge angling downward toward the bottom of the rocky throat. It was down this the masked man came charging, headlong, the stallion somehow finding sure footing. And all at once guns were thundering in the gloved hands of the black-robed figure.

The ambushers had turned their fire in this direction, now, and their leader was bawling startled commands.

"Stay where you are, men!" he cried. "Stay in cover! We've got the advantage!"

PANIC seemed to have touched his crew, fear-inspired by the startling appearance of the man in black. For these were owlhooters, and there could not be one of them who had not heard the terrifying legends of the mysterious nemesis of evil known to the world only by the cape and mask that utterly cloaked his identity. They knew the death-dealing power of his twin Colts, the implacable and unrelenting justice he brought to wrongdoers who fell victim to his wrath.

They worked triggers frantically, but fear destroyed their aim and the masked man came on, the great black stallion leveling out now as his steel shoes hit the floor of the canyon.

Dan Kent, sprawled beside his dead gelding, saw the outlaw leader now. He glimpsed the shine of a bullet scar across the man's cheek and the recognition lifted him up to one elbow. Rage was mingled with a determination that he should get in at least one blow for himself to aid the mysterious rider who had so miraculously and daringly come to his rescue.

He had somehow forgotten in his pain and confusion that the six-gun was already empty. The sights wobbled on the figure of the fleeing badman. The trigger seemed unbelievably stiff against the pressure of his trembling finger. He squeezed it with the last of his strength, and as the hammer clicked uselessly he dropped forward heavily across the stiffening body of his horse.

Plunging forward into the teeth of gunfire, the Masked Rider saw Kent go down. It redoubled the cold, implacable fury which had sent him into the uneven fight, needing no more than the sight of an unequal battle against odds to make him throw his deadly guns into the fight on the side of the lone stranger trapped in the bottom of the canyon.

The twin Colts bucked against strong, gloved hands. Lead sang about him, clipped at the folds of the black cloak streaming from his wide shoulders.

A scream of pain mingled with the confusion of gun echoes as one of the ambushers jerked erect from behind the boulder where he had taken cover. He spun, and slewed down into the brush.

The robed horseman kneed his black stallion half around then as the man ensconced at the mouth of the canyon, behind him, sent a bullet whistling dangerously close past his masked face. A single shot from the Masked Rider's right-hand gun brought the man pitching head-first from his hiding place halfway up the wall of the canyon. It dropped him in a sprawled and broken heap at the foot of the rock.

As Morgan's knuckles connected solidly against the jaw of the big man, Beecher stopped in midstride (CHAP. V)

As Midnight whirled again toward the main body of the ambushers, the courage of the remaining outlaws began to crumble.

One man broke, first, turned and started running up the shadowed throat of the canyon to where saddle horses had been left when they laid the ambush. Then, in a quick scatter, the others followed, making a rear-guard fight as they dropped back with the Masked Rider pushing them relentlessly.

When he saw the fight was out of them, however, and that the remaining outlaws were intent now only on escaping with their lives, the black-garbed man let them go.

He slipped his smoking guns into leather, took the reins and brought Midnight, his great stallion, back upon his heels, a word or two in a hoarse, low voice quieting the eager animal.

His only intention had been to break up an unfair battle and attempt to save the lone man from his attackers. This had been accomplished but the victim had fallen in the fight, and if he was not dead would need immediate attention. Under the circumstances. The Masked Rider had no alternative but to let the rest of the ambushers escape.

He turned and rode quickly back to the dead gelding, swung down lightly and moved forward with quick, long strides. He was a powerful figure, slightly over six feet tall, with wide shoulders that tapered to lean hips and a lithe, quick sureness of movement beneath the enveloping black cape.

As he leaned over the body of the young man sprawled beside the dead horse, the Masked Rider's jaw was hard and firm, the eyes behind the mask icy and dangerous at sight of the work the ambushers' lead had done.

The bullet had entered the body low and on the left side, grazing ribs. Though shadows were lengthening here in the canyon, the sky above the rims turning rosy with sunset, there was still sufficient light to show that the hurt man was alive but needed medical care desperately. Blood pulsed from the wound, reddening his clothing and the bare rocks on which he lay.

His breath was a sawing of sound through parted lips.

CHAPTER II

Val Norris

THE MASKED RIDER considered the situation for a long moment. Then, slowly straightening, he looked around him in the silence of the canyon. The beat of hoofs had quickly died. The outlaws were gone, and except for the two dead they had left behind and the wounded man at the robed rider's feet, there was nothing to indicate that a battle had been fought here. Slowly, The Masked Rider lifted his head. From his parted lips there rose upon the stillness of the canyon the long, trembling cry of a mountain lion.

He waited, listening. Almost immediately the cry was answered from somewhere above the canyon rim, and moments later the figure of an Indian appeared to view there, forking the saddle of a wiry gray pony. Dark hair, shoulder length, swept below the bright bandeau that circled his forehead. There was a sash about the waist of his drill trousers. A rifle thrust up from the saddle boot beneath his right knee.

"Down here, Blue Hawk!" the Masked Rider called up to him. "There's a way to get down, a dozen yards to your right."

But the sharp eyes of the Yaqui Indian had already detected the crack in the wall and he put his gray to it, quickly maneuvering the tricky descent to the canyon floor. He sprang from saddle, leaping lightly to the ground as he came up to the waiting Masked Rider.

"You find gunsmoke, Senor?" he said, simply. "And three dead men."

"Two dead," the masked man corrected him. "This young fellow is bad hurt, but maybe we can do somethin' for him. The other pair were part of a bunch of drygulchers who all but had him done for. He wouldn't have lasted long without help."

The Indian shook his head, his smoky eyes somber.

"The Sunstones!" he murmured. "These are strange hills, Senor—and strange and terrible things happen here."

"That's the reason you and I are here, Blue Hawk," the other reminded him

quietly. "But now, see what you and your Yaqui wisdom can do for this youngster with the bullet in him."

Blue Hawk needed no urging. He was already on his knees beside the wounded man, coppery face intent, his movements deft and sure as with amazing gentleness he stripped away the bloody shirt and exposed the bullet wound beneath. He shook his head.

"Is very bad, Senor," he said solemnly.

"Do what you can. If we can get him talkin', we could maybe learn a few things that'll help us."

"Some water, Senor?" The Yaqui said then.

Quickly, the Masked Rider stepped and unhooked a water can from the saddle of Midnight, and passed it over. He stood back, then, and let the Indian work, knowing that he possessed savage skills which the white could do little to aid him. Few words were spoken during the next anxious moments.

They made a strange pair, this mysterious black-robed rider and the faithful Yaqui Indian who was his constant aid and never-failing friend. Yet two better-teamed fighting men had never ridden, stirrup to stirrup, through gunsmoke and flying lead to the aid of the downtrodden and the oppressed.

No one, not even Blue Hawk himself, could tell from what springs of bitter experience the Masked Rider had drunk, that he should have become a Robin Hood outlaw—wanted by the law for crimes other men committed in his name, giving himself unstintingly to the uprooting of evil wherever he might find it.

Not even Blue Hawk knew his background, or, for that matter, what his real name might be. The intelligent, mission-trained Yaqui was sure only that this strange man exerted a force of character that tied him completely to the robed rider's purpose. Together, they were a nemesis to evil and wrongdoing such as the range country had never before seen!

At last Blue Hawk finished his work over the wounded man and settled back with a grunt, squatting on the heels of his moccasins.

"There it is, Senor—all that I can do. Nothing now but to wait. If this man has strength within him, he will get well. If not—"

The Indian shrugged.

"I wish we could get him to a doctor," the Masked Rider remarked, his mouth bleak.

"He could not be moved so far, Senor. It might kill—"

BLUE HAWK'S speech broke off in his throat and he jerked his head up, raven-black hair brushing the shoulders of his shirt as he turned quickly to the near-by canyon mouth.

The Masked Rider swung around, reaching for gun handle. He had carefully reloaded the spent shells in his Colts while Blue Hawk was at work on the wounded man, since he could never tell from moment to moment when he would be needing the use of his weapons.

The range was filled with evil men who held grudges against him for the justice he had dealt out to them in times past. In addition to these, they were bounty-hunting law officers to whom the Masked Rider was an outlaw with a price on his head, as well as mere gunmen out for the glory of downing the dreaded masked scourge of the shadowed owlhoot trails.

So now, though he had heard nothing, he knew the Indian's keen ears had caught some sound out there beyond the dusky canyon, and he prepared to face whatever danger it might mean.

"A horse, Senor," Blue Hawk whispered quickly. "A rider!"

The Masked Rider nodded. He had heard it by this time—the clink of iron shoes against stone. And now, abruptly, the mount broke into view past the entrance to the shadowed canyon.

It came in at a walk, shying suddenly at the body of the dead outlaw sprawled on the rocks where the Masked Rider's bullet had dropped him.

They heard a quick gasp of fright.

"A girl!" exclaimed the Masked Rider.

She lifted her eyes from the dead man, astonishment replacing the horror in them as she saw the black-caped figure striding toward her. Her eyes were a dark stain against the pallor of her face, with its soft frame of brown curls tumbling from beneath a flat-crowned riding hat. She wore a loose blouse, a divided riding skirt, dainty boots.

A small-calibered sixshooter hung from

a belt about her hips but, out of startlement or for some other reason, she made no move to touch the weapon, although her alarm was apparent.

"Please don't be frightened, Miss!" the Masked Rider said quickly in his deep voice. "There's nothing to hurt you. Just tell us what you might be doing here, at a place and a time like this."

"I—I was riding the hills," she explained in a breathless voice, "and I heard gunfire. I thought I should investigate and notify my stepfather, Jed Beecher, if it was anything serious. His Horseshoe Ranch lies not many miles from these Sunstone badlands." Her glance dropped again to the sprawled body of the dead man. "You—did that?"

He nodded. "It had to be done," the Masked Rider said, nodding. " A bunch of 'em had this youngster caught in a trap. I managed to ride in and break it up—though whether in time to save his life, is something that remains to be seen."

The girl glanced quickly and saw Blue Hawk and the wounded man for the first time.

"Oh!" she cried. "He's hurt!"

Her puzzled astonishment at sight of the masked man, and horror at the man he had killed were apparently swept away but sudden urgency. Quickly she came down from saddle, moving past the Masked Rider, who stood aside for her.

The hurt man looked young and pathetic, stretched out there, his face strained beneath its mask of dirt and beard stubble, his eyes closed. He seemed utterly helpless, utterly vulnerable, and something in this must have touched a deep, responding chord within the girl.

She dropped upon her knees next to Blue Hawk and put out a slender hand to smooth the hair back from the brow of the hurt man. It was at that moment that Dan Kent opened his eyes and looked distantly into her own.

It was growing rapidly darker within the canyon, though sunset light still glowed upon the crystal-glittering hills outside its rocky walls. But features were still discernible in the gathering dusk and for a long moment the hurt man stared at the girl's face, so close above his own, as though he might already have died and awakened to find an angel bending over him.

Finally a warped, pain-tight smile worked at his bearded lips and he muttered a faint *Hello.*

AT ONCE the Masked Rider stepped forward and was down beside the youngster, his deep voice harsh and prodding.

"Can you talk to us? Can you tell us who the bushwhackers were that put this bullet into you. Why they did?"

The words brought harsh memory, sharpening the feverish gleam of the wounded man's eyes.

"My horses!" he exclaimed. He would have started up except for the restraining hand the Maskd Rider put upon his shoulder. "Forty head of purebred Morgan mares!" he went on, more coherently. "They took 'em from my ranch near Elkhide, three days ago. I trailed them clear to the Sunstones—and lost 'em again!" Bitterness filled the last words.

"Elkhide?" the Masked Rider echoed, in some astonishment. "But that's a hundred miles from here, clear in the center of the state!"

"I'm telling the truth," the man insisted. "You can check on it. I'm Dan Kent, and I do own a ranch. And I been trailin' the dirty snakes who—"

"That's all right," the robed man put in quickly. "We ain't doubtin' your word, Dan. But these horse thieves—you know any of 'em?"

"All I know is that the leader has a scar on his right cheek. I spotted him once in the fight, had my sights on him, but the gun was empty!" A sudden frenzy gripped him. "My stock! They took 'em somewhere up the canyon. I followed 'em and rode into a gun trap. I gotta get after 'em! I gotta—"

A groan broke from him and his body, overstrained and weakened by the bullet Blue Hawk had dug out of it, suddenly failed him. Dan Kent fell back and unconscious.

"I think we get those forty head of horses back, maybe, Senor?" Blue Hawk said quietly.

"We'll do more than that, if we're able," agreed the Masked Rider, grimly. "These Sunstone hills are the center for a lot of mighty queer goings-on, and before we

get through I think we're gonna be buckin' as tight and tough a setup of organized crime as we ever run across! That's my personal guess, Blue Hawk."

"I think you're right!" The hand of the girl was clutching his sleeve suddenly. "I've only been in this region a few weeks, myself, but I've seen things that—that have made me wonder. The Sunstones lie right across the state line, you know. And—"

"It could be a made-to-order setup for badmen who need a handy route for escape across the border from one state to another," finished the masked man. Her nod was barely visible in the rapidly settling darkness. He added: "Have you been noticing strange riders in these hills, coming and going without any apparent reason?"

"Yes!" the girl exclaimed. "And more than that—"

She broke off in mid-sentence.

He prodded her. "Yes?"

"Nothing!"

Suddenly she was on her feet, by her manner seeming to want to put an end to this talk. The Masked Rider rose quickly, following her.

"I don't like to ask this of you," he said, "but I'm gonna have to. I'll strike a couple of matches, and I want you to take a look at these two hombres I killed and see if you remember layin' eyes on them before."

He could sense the effort with which she steeled herself before she said, "All right."

They went first to the body that her pony had shied from at the mouth of the canyon. It was so dark now that a match was needed to show his features at all plainly. They were bloody and ugly under the feeble light, a hard and cruel face even in death.

The girl's voice sounded a little choked as she said, "I never saw him before." It was the same with the other dead man.

"Thanks," the Masked Rider said, and shook out the match. "That wasn't very pleasant, I reckon. I'm sorry."

The girl went back to her pony. Taking the reins, she said suddenly:

"Dan Kent needs a doctor's help. I'll ride the Horseshoe Ranch and have a wagon sent for him. There's a doctor in Grass Valley who can come there."

The Masked Rider nodded. "That'd be mighty considerate of you, Miss Beecher."

"My name is Val Norris," she quickly corrected him. "Jed Beecher is my stepfather." She turned, then, and swung up into the light stock saddle. "I'll send help as soon as I can."

The clatter of her pony's hoofs sounded as she sent it forward out of the canyon which had nearly proved Dan Kent's death trap. Watching her go, the Masked Rider heard the Yaqui's voice behind him in the gloom:

"That girl, Senor—there is something troubling her, something she does not wish to talk about."

"You caught that, did you, Blue Hawk?" The Masked man nodded. "She started to tell us, and then changed her mind and held it back. I wonder what it was? I got a feelin' it would be important to know!" He shrugged, and turned back toward the waiting Midnight. "Stay with Kent, Blue Hawk. I'm takin' a little jaunt up the canyon, to see if maybe I can get a line on which way they took those stolen horses."

"Keep your guns handy, Senor," Blue Hawk advised him quietly. "The scar-faced man and the others, they will be dangerous, now, for they know you are on their trail."

"I don't aim to have my eyes shut," the black-robed man answered dryly.

Then the clatter of Midnight's iron-shod hoofs beat back from the canyon's broken walls as he moved off on the trail of the vanished horse thieves.

CHAPTER III

Horseshoe Ranch

HEAVY thoughts rode with Val Norris as she pushed her horse at a hard clip toward her stepfather's ranch at the edge of the Sunstones. Doubts and questions had been growing in her mind in the few weeks since the death of the aunt she had been staying with, had sent her West to live on the ranch which belonged to her dead mother's second husband. Now they had come to a head, and mingled with them was the disturbing picture of Dan

Kent, lying hurt and in need of medical care.

She didn't know why a man she had never seen before should suddenly take on such importance for her. She decided that probably his helplessness and pain appealed to some woman's instinct deep within her.

At any rate, she kept her pony working hard, and the last pearly light of day was not completely gone from the wide horizon when she came out of the badlands and dropped down upon the buildings and corrals of Jed Beecher's Horseshoe Ranch.

Banging of pots and pans came from the cook shack, mingled with the nasal twang of the Chinese cook's constant song. At the bunkhouse, men lounged in the doorway waiting for the ringing of the dinner bell.

Val could feel their eyes upon her as she brought her pony to a quick stop before the main house, where another lathered bronc already stood on trailing reins. She tried to ignore them, but it was these men—the constantly shifting hardcase crew of Horseshoe Ranch—who

had first put dark misgivings into her.

She remembered now that startling question the masked man had put to her

Before Beecher's dead body could hit the ground, Morgan put a slug into the scar-faced killer whose shot had gone awry (CHAP. IX)

—about strange riders she might have noticed in the hills, coming and going without clear reason or purpose. For it had echoed the question in her own mind, the thing she had started to blurt out to him but then quickly withheld.

After all, she was not a Western girl; she knew nothing of cattle ranches. Yet it seemed to her the riders she saw at Horseshoe Ranch did strangely little work. And it was odd they should appear and disappear the way they did—riding in, spending a few days loafing about the bunkhouse and drinking Jed Beecher's expensive brand of whisky, and then one morning having disappeared and no explanation offered.

Her stepfather himself was a strange man, blocky, grizzled, short of speech. Now, as she stepped down from her pony and went quickly up the steps of the log house and through the big doorway, she found Jed Beecher in the main room. The foreman, "Monk" Swale, and a couple of his men were with him. A slight scowl dragged at the ranch-owner's brow as the girl burst into the room.

"What's wrong, Val?" he demanded sharply, catching the look in her face.

A lamp had been set burning against the gathering dusk. The upwash of its light touched the faces of the men, glinted on the whisky in the tumblers they had been drinking from, pushed back the edges of the shadows. Beecher stood in front of the cold fireplace. He turned quickly and set his glass upon the stone mantelpiece, and then came forward to meet her.

"Tell us what's wrong," he repeated, clouded eyes searching her face.

As she told him, pouring out the story —of the gunshots she had heard while riding the Sunstone hills, of the dark canyon and what she had discovered there. Her stepfather interrupted her once.

"A masked man, Val? You sure you couldn't have been mistaken?"

She saw his sharp glance move past her, cut to the stolid face of the foreman, Monk Swale.

"He had a mask and a cape," she said. "And there was an Indian, and this wounded man. Dan Kent is badly hurt, Jed! We've *got* to help him! I promised to send a wagon to bring him here to the ranch."

Beecher's manner changed abruptly. A reassuring smile moved his heavy lips and he patted her arm a little. "Why sure, Val—sure!" He turned to his foreman. "You take some of the boys, Monk, and head up there pronto. Naturally, we go to do anythin' we can."

Monk Swale took his orders with a brief nod, rose and turned toward the door.

"Have somebody switch my saddle onto another horse, please," Val called after him quickly, "Because I'll have to go with you to show the way."

The gaunt-bodied man went through the door without answering or even looking back. His spurs rang across the veranda, were muffled in the dust of the yard. The other two had risen to follow. One, Val had seen around the ranch before, but the second was a stranger to her, his trail clothing stained and dusty. As he went past her the lampglow touched briefly on lean, hawklike features, and a sudden chill of terror seized on Val, constricted her throat.

"Jed!" she cried, the sound choking in her throat as her staring eyes followed the figure of the man melting into the night beyond the door. "That man! He had a scar on his face!"

She heard her stepfather's quickly veiled voice.

"You imagined it," he said. "Must have been the way the light hit him."

"No!" She whirled, facing Jed Beecher. "He had a scar, you know he did!" The truth dawned upon her with sickening clarity. "That was his horse I saw out front, wasn't it? He must have come here only a few minutes ahead of me. He's the very man Dan Kent described—the leader of the gang that stole his horses!"

JED BEECHER'S voice was harsh in denial, and it carried no conviction. "You're talkin' crazy!" he blurted.

His blocky face was an interesting medley of expressions, and Val Norris, staring at him in the lamplight, read correctly what she saw there.

"It's true!' she breathed, chokingly. "And you know all about it. You—you're sending them now to finish the job of murdering Dan Kent!"

Suddenly she turned and started for the open door. The heavy hand of her stepfather seized her shoulder, pulled her back.

"Just where do you think you're goin'!" he gritted harshly.

She fought him, silently. She remembered the little sixshooter in her holster and tried to draw it, but his big paw trapped her wrist and with a savage wrench sent the weapon spilling to the floor. He howled with pain as her teeth closed upon the hand that gripped her arm; then a blow of the open palm sent her reeling back against the table edge, stunned. Quickly he moved on her, trapped her arms so she could not struggle.

Val saw his face close above her own. She had never known her stepfather very well, before circumstances sent her here to stay with him on his ranch. The twisted visage, the glaring eyes that looked at her now did not seem at all like the Jed Beecher she remembered.

"You little hellion!" he gritted. "Try to bust the prettiest setup goin', would you? I knew you was poison, the very

day you hit this ranch. I knew there was gonna be trouble with you around. But you ain't doin' any more damage!"

"What—what are you going to do to me?" she demanded, still weak from the numbing effect of the blow.

He shook his head, but his eyes were sharp and unyielding.

"I dunno for sure," Jed Beecher admitted. "Not right yet. First, we got to take care of that Kent hombre, blast the persistent devil! And the Masked Rider—"

At this thought, fear seemed to flicker in the depths of the man's eyes. But bravado rose and pushed this aside.

"Even the Masked Rider ain't gonna mess with a thing the size of this!" he grunted. "He's only one man, and a bullet can kill him as dead as anybody else!"

He laughed shortly, and with the girl's stunned look upon him reached for the bottle and an empty glass. As he started to pour himself a drink, the sound of horses starting out of the ranch yard came through the open door. Val Norris listened to the sound of the hoofs roll away and thin out across the deepening night.

A dozen riders, at least—and heading to finish the job that had been left undone in that canyon in the Sunstones!

THE MASKED RIDER, leaving Blue Hawk with the hurt man, pushed on into the canyon. It was completely dark there by this time, and stars showed in the pale strip of sky above the broken, eroded rim. He rode cautiously, but feeling certain that the drygulchers would have lost no time in making their escape after the fight at the canyon mouth.

Silence was complete except for the rustle of a stirring breeze in the brush that clung to the canyon walls and the noise of Midnight's hoofs striking solid rock flooring. It was too dark down here to follow sign, but he knew that likely there would have been nothing to see in any event. The canyon floor was too hard to have taken any prints. Instead of searching for them, he pushed ahead to find a farther outlet.

He rode for at least two miles, the deep slash in the rock twisting slightly a time or two. From the changing sound of the black's echoing hoofbeats, its course apparently was broken by numerous side passages. When the way finally tilted sharply upward, Midnight's hoofs struck soft and muffling dirt as the canyon's sides fell back and they emerged upon a flat and barren mesa top.

The Masked Rider pulled in here and let a sweeping glance run across the broken country ahead of him, which was still visible in the fast-falling light. More of the pinnacles and gashes and eroded scarps of the Sunstones, lying empty and desolate beneath the sky. He looked down at the soft earth at Midnight's feet, then, and a frown carved into the dark face behind the mask.

Even in the poor light, he was able to see that no riders could have gone this way, to say nothing of Dan Kent's forty head of stolen horses. Though the winds that swept that high land would tend to keep it smoothed of tracks, they would not have removed so soon the evidence of such a large band of horsemen and stolen stock.

This, he decided, could mean only one thing. The thieves had turned aside back there, into some one of those numerous cross channels that broke the canyon's walls. Picking up their trail on that hard, unyielding rock floor would be a very hard job indeed. An impossible one, if undertaken by night.

Finding himself blocked on this score, the Masked Rider reined about and retraced his course, to return at last to the place where he had left the Yaqui and his charge. Blue Hawk spoke out of the shadows, and he dismounted to talk over with the Indian what he had discovered.

"I drew a blank," he admitted. "The trail is gettin' hot, though. Thanks to the courage of young Dan Kent, we've been led practically to the place we've been lookin' for. We might've hunted in vain all through these Sunstone badlands, if it wasn't for him."

"And just what is it, Senor, you hope to find?" asked the Yaqui.

"A central hideout for all the outlaw gangs operating on either side of the state line that runs through these hills. It ain't any coincidence, the way criminal activities have been on the increase in these two states over the past year or so. The owlhooters have been gettin' more out

of hand. They pull more and more daring crimes and then disappear right from under the noses of the law. And no lawman has had any luck in tracin' them.

"But all signs point to the Sunstones," he continued, "and if we're to scotch this reign of owlhoot terror, I think we're gonna have to do it right here—somewhere in the vicinity of this same canyon where we're squattin' at this very minute!"

"When that time comes," Blue Hawk said grimly, "I'll be keeping my eyes open for forty purebred Morgan mares!"

"Right," agreed the Masked Rider. He added: "For the moment, while we're waitin' for Miss Norris and that wagon from Horseshoe Ranch, we better get rid of this pair of dead owlhooters. Even a horse thief deserves a decent burial. We haven't got a shovel with us, but we can at least load some rocks on them to keep off the scavengers."

CHAPTER IV

Wayne Morgan Appears

BLUE HAWK fell in with this suggestion without comment. They had barely finished the gruesome job when once more the sound of nearing hoofs came across the darkness. This time, the Masked Rider heard them as quickly as the keen-eared Yaqui.

He hastily dropped the match by whose light he had checked the disposal of the bodies, and moved forward to the mouth of the canyon where the sounds came clearer, unmuffled by the intervening walls of rock. He stood there with the night wind fanning his dark, masked features, flapping the tail of his flowing cape.

"A lot of them," he said. "And coming fast. You reckon they're from Horseshoe?"

The Yaqui listened and then made a single observation; but it was a significant one.

"No wagon, Senor."

"You're right, Blue Hawk? With a rig, they couldn't be coming that fast or by a direct route. So this can't be the help Miss Norris promised to send."

Yet there could be little doubt that the riders were heading directly for this canyon. And the Masked Rider, considering the situation and remembering the hurt man, came to a quick conclusion.

"Come on! Whoever that is we hear, I gotta notion we better move Dan Kent out of sight. You got an extra blanket on your pack roll, Blue Hawk. We can use it for a stretcher."

Moving hurriedly, while the sounds of the coming riders grew steadily nearer, they got Dan Kent's limp body onto the blanket, and by picking up its corners were able to make it do for a carry-lift. Scrub pine grew on a slope just out of the canyon mouth, and at the Masked Rider's suggestion they took the wounded man up into their protection.

Blue Hawk went back for Midnight and the gray while the robed man made Dan Kent as comfortable as possible. The wounded man was still unconscious, but the short distance they had carried him did not seem to have started his wound bleeding again.

A bright, white moon was tipping over the desolate eastern horizon, putting its silver sheen across the broken land and probing directly into the mouth of the canyon. And now a guttural exclamation from Blue Hawk confirmed the Masked Rider's own glimpse of a dark clot of figures, sweeping into view to their south.

These disappeared, then melted out of the shadows again. As the watchers kept down in the cover of scrub timber on the slope, the horsemen quickly burst into sight below them and pulled to a milling halt just outside the canyon's entrance.

The Masked Rider had one hand upon the butt of a holstered gun, knowing the urge to draw and throw down on the men below. But that would endanger the hurt Dan Kent—a risk he could not afford to take. So, instead, he had to content himself with listening to the voices of the night riders. That was easy to do, for they were very close and the words echoed up clearly to the listeners.

"He's gone! Right there where the moonlight's layin', he ought to be. I see his bronc, but no sign of the fella."

"Ride in and take a look," ordered a gruff voice, that seemed to come from a stoop-shouldered hairpin figure on the

back of one of the leading broncs.

"Who—me?" echoed the first speaker. "Into that canyon, with the Masked Rider somewhere around and maybe listening to the very words we're sayin'? No thanks, Monk Swale! I wanta live a spell longer!"

The leader started to curse. "Of all the dumb, chuckle-headed boners, anyhow—leading the Masked Rider practically to the hideout and then lettin' him take Kent away from you, alive!"

"I suppose you coulda done better?" retorted the other hotly. "It wouldn't o' bothered you to see the Masked Rider drop out of the sky and burn down two of your men, before you even knew what was happening?"

"Aw, shut up! You got the chief and the organization to answer to, Talley. Save your excuses for them. . . . Well, if nobody else in this crowd has got any gumption, I guess I'll have to take a look around in there. Keep your guns handy, in case I need some help, savvy?"

THIS Monk Swale had nerve. It took that to ride forward into the jaws of the canyon, where brush and rock shadows were black against the moonlight and where at any moment a hidden gun might be lurking to pick him off.

When he met with no danger, however, the rest of the riders took courage and followed him through the entrance, kneeing their sweaty horses forward in a cautious straggle.

"Can't hear what they say now," the Masked Rider muttered, as they disappeared.

"I fix that, Senor," Blue Hawk answered.

Next moment the Yaqui was gone, silent as a shadow. The Masked Rider smiled a little. It was uncanny, sometimes, the way Blue Hawk would maneuver, could go anywhere he wanted to, hear what he wanted to hear without anyone having any notion of his presence.

Long moments dragged by. A night breeze sank along the slope, touched the scrub-pine branches. Once Dan Kent stirred a little, and the Masked Rider leaned over him anxiously for fear the wounded man might make some sound that would betray the hiding place.

But this did not happen; and presently the riders were streaming into sight out of the canyon mouth again. An order from Monk Swale set them stringing out as they went away at a gallop, back in the direction from which they had come.

The Masked Rider watched them go. The sound of their hoofs still hung upon the night air when Blue Hawk appeared at his elbow, moving in so silently that the Masked Rider was surprised by the sound of his voice.

"They have gone, Senor."

"Yeah. What did you hear, Blue Hawk?"

"Nothing important. They looked around inside the canyon entrance, hunted out the shadows to make sure Dan Kent hadn't crawled off by himself somewhere. They found where we buried the dead men. They soon left."

"All of 'em together?"

"Yes, Senor."

"Too bad!" said the Masked Rider. "I was hopin' they'd send a messenger into the hideout with a warning for the 'Chief,' so we could have followed him. Well, we know that we're on the trail of somethin' big—a well managed and disciplined organization!"

"One thing, Senor, I almost forgot," Blue Hawk said. "Just before they leave, someone said, 'What about the girl? What was she doin' in the hills this afternoon? I got a notion she knows more than she lets on'. And the one called Monk said: 'That's Jed's problem'."

"Jed!" exclaimed the Masked Rider. "He meant Jed Beecher, Val Norris' stepfather. You see what it adds up to, Blue Hawk?"

The Yaqui nodded in the faint light of the soaring moon. "The girl must be in danger. Down at Horseshoe Ranch. Shall I bring Midnight, Senor?"

But the Masked Rider, considering, slowly shook his head.

"No, Blue Hawk," he said. "I don't like waitin', either. But after this alarm, Horseshoe will have a guard out, there likely wouldn't be any chance of gettin' through to her tonight. I figure, though, if it isn't already too late to save her, morning will do just as well. And with morning, a fiddle-footed cowhand lookin' for a job could likely get in close and take a good squint at the place—maybe

find out what's goin' on, and what's been done to the girl."

"It's a job for Wayne Morgan, then?" queried the Yaqui.

"A job for Wayne Morgan," agreed the Masked Rider.

THEY made a dry camp, near by in a sheltered cove of rock that could be easily defended and not too easily discovered. When Dan Kent had been carefully transported to this location and placed on a bed of pine boughs and blankets, the Masked Rider prepared camp.

Blue Hawk, mounting the gray, rode out and returned a half hour later with a pair of horses in tow. One was a pinto, the other a hammerheaded roan; these were the balance of their cavvy. There was a pocket of grass here and Blue Hawk turned the four horses into this, giving Midnight and his own gray a careful rubdown with handfuls of dried hay.

The Masked Rider's concern for Dan Kent lessened somewhat when he discovered that the wounded youngster was sleeping peacefully, without fever. There would be no chance now of getting him to a doctor, but thanks to Blue Hawk's wise doctoring it seemed that, with rest, Kent's healthy body could go far toward healing itself.

After a hasty meal of trail rations they talked awhile about the situation confronting them, and then rolled into their blankets with guns ready at hand. They were aware that this was dangerous enemy territory.

They were stirring before the first rays of morning drew a million shining sparkles of light from the quartz crystals of the Sunstone hills.

This morning, Blue Hawk's companion was no longer the mysterious figure of the black-caped Masked Rider. He had removed the black robe, the mask and the black hat which he had worn yesterday. The man who now sat cross-legged making fast work of a cold breakfast, while the morning mists still clung to the lower ground, was one of a very different appearance.

An ordinary cowhand, you might have thought, from the look and the sound of him. Even his voice had altered, had dropped its harsh, deep tones and taken on the soft, quiet drawl of the range. A gray Stetson sat well back on his dark, straight hair. The face which the mask had covered was revealed now as brown and strong, capable of sparkling with humor or turning icy-eyed in sudden anger.

And even this was a disguise—this character which the Masked Rider assumed whenever necessity brought him into the world of men without his mask and cape. No man in the world, except Blue Hawk of course, would have suspected that the soft-spoken, tophand cowpuncher who called himself by the name of "Wayne Morgan" and the mysterious Robin Hood rider were one and the same.

"You got two fulltime jobs ahead of you while I'm gone," he told Blue Hawk now. "You got to take care of Dan Kent. And at the same time it would solve half our problem if you could somehow manage to dig out the trail to this hideout we're lookin' for. We know it's somewhere doggone close, but that's a long distance from knowing how to ride a bronc into it!"

The Yaqui nodded. "It will be well ridden, Senor. I think maybe It can be found, though."

"If anybody can do it, you're the one." Morgan came easily to his feet. "Me, I'm plumb uneasy about Val Norris. She stumbled into somethin' last night that she wasn't supposed to know about, and until I find out for sure that she hasn't been hurt as a consequence, I'm gonna figure myself more than a little responsible. I guess it ain't too early in the day to drop in on that Horseshoe outfit for a little visit. I'll be on my way."

He threw his saddle on the hammerheaded roan. He never rode Midnight except when in character as the Masked Rider. Within a few minutes he was jogging out through the glittering Sunstones, heading with sure instinct for the Beecher spread.

He looked the part he wished to play—a fiddle-footed cowhand, riding with no particular pressure on him, completely at home in the saddle. His clothes were ordinary range garb, his boots dark and well worn, the twin guns shaped to his flat thighs not bearing any marking by which they might be recognized as the deadly weapons of the Masked Rider himself.

The desolate hills flattened out gradually, and presently he found brown rangelands below him and spotted a ranch layout which he figured must be his goal. He studied it carefully as he rode in: the log barn and bunkhouse and rambling, one-storied main house, shimmering in the morning light, seemed well built but neglected.

There was plenty of life about the place —Morgan counted half a dozen riders at the corral and passing across the hard-baked earth between bunkhouse and cook shack. Others, perhaps, were out of sight at the moment. A big crew, when you considered this wasn't the shipping season.

Wayne Morgan noted and stored away in his quick mind all these details. And there was one thing more that held his narrow attention: A couple of windows, in a wing of the sprawling main house, had shutters drawn against the morning sunlight and those shutters were fastened from the outside. This might not mean anything, but he didn't let the fact escape him.

CHAPTER V

A Paper-Wrapped Missile

A BLOCKY, solid figure of a man had just stepped out of the house. He stood against the veranda railing as the newcomer rode up, a dark and unreadable look on his heavy features. He made no motion of greeting when the stranger reined in, hitched to a comfortable position in the saddle and said pleasantly:

"Morning! This Jed Beecher's Horseshoe outfit?"

The big man ran a glance over the other before answering, his look clinging for a moment to the twin Colts snugged down on Morgan's lean thighs. He nodded then, bluntly. "I'm Beecher. Who sent you?"

Others were watching this in silence, waiting for the new man's answer. And Wayne Morgan guessed quickly that Beecher's question was in the nature of a test. They had seen him come in from the direction of the Sunstones; they assumed he was one of their own kind—another of the owlhooters who rode the shadow trails. But since his face was unknown to them, they would probably demand an identification of some kind. He followed the only course thus left open to him.

"Can't say I know what you mean." He shrugged a little. "Nobody sent me. The name is Wayne Morgan, and I'm lookin' for a ridin' job. Somebody in the next state said you might be hirin', so I took a jaunt through the badlands. Near got myself lost in there!"

"Did, huh?" Jed Beecher's heavy face altered slightly, and a hint of contempt quirked his heavy lips. He said, "You just wasted time, fella. Look to you like I need any more hands?"

Morgan glanced over the men in the yard. "No," he admitted, grinning a little foolishly. "You do seem pretty full up, for a fact."

"Better haul your freight, cowboy!"

There was a chill note in the order, but Wayne Morgan made no move. He was having a good, close inspection of the ranch layout and he didn't mean to be hurried in it. Particularly, now, those two closed and shuttered windows held his atttention.

Stalling as he studied them, cautiously, he said, "Am I too late for breakfast?"

"I told you to slope," Jed Beecher repeated sharply, his eyes hardening. "There's no handouts here for saddle bums and grubliners!"

The flicker of icy danger in Morgan's eyes was quickly shielded behind drooping lids as he dug into a pocket of his flannel shirt, brought out tobacco sack and wheat papers.

"Kind o' hard on a gent, ain't you?" he murmured.

A stiff breeze was blowing from his right, fluttering the neckcloth about his throat, whipping at the brim of his gray Stetson. This had given him an inspiration. Carefully he maneuvered his roan about, a step or two, as he fumbled with the cigarette makin's.

"I'll give you just three minutes—" Beecher started in a voice heavy with warning.

But at that instant the breeze tore the packet of wheat papers from Morgan's fingers and they went fluttering across

the yard, straight toward the house wing with its shuttered windows. Morgan vented an exclamation of feigned dismay and, stuffing the tobacco sack into his pocket, swung down and started legging after the papers.

He got close enough that he could almost have touched one of those latched shutters before Jed Beecher's oath sounded. There was the thud of the rancher's heavy boots as he vaulted the veranda rail and started forward at a run.

Morgan, stooping to gather some of the scattered papers, straightened and started to turn. Beecher's heavy paw landed on his shoulder, hauled him forcibly around and off balance. "You're kinda nosy, ain't you?" grated Beecher.

The Horseshoe Ranch owner's other fist came over, knotted and hard, and landed high against the side of Morgan's head.

Morgan went back, shoulders striking the window shutters with a smashing noise. There had been weight behind that blow. Beecher was maybe fifteen years older than Morgan, but he was in prime condition and had muscles of an ox.

"When I tell a man to dust his saddle," he bellowed, "I mean for him to do it!"

And before Morgan could get set for him the big man rushed, both hamlike fists swinging, an eager pleasure of hurting showing in his face.

MORGAN took one blow in the chest and then slid out of the way, let Beecher ram into the heavy logs of the wall. The man roared in anger as he came around. He met a jabbing fist that caught him across meaty lips, snapped his head back sharply on its short, thick neck.

Wayne Morgan followed that with a slamming left into the barrellike chest of the man. The other back-pedaled a step or two, then caught himself and came charging in to close with his opponent. There was fury in him, now.

Not wanting to let those massive hands reach him, Morgan hit and moved away. There had been a moment when he could have got one of his colts from holster and let its menace finish this, hold the Horseshoe Ranch boss at a distance. But Beecher liked to use his fists, and Morgan sensed that his only chance of keeping those other hardcases out of the thing was to let the man have his way. If he had touched gun metal there would have been other weapons instantly clearing leather, and he wouldn't have had a chance against so many.

So his cue was to keep away from the infuriated rancher, keep the fight fair and clean and make his punches hurt. And he did this, driving in murderous blows to face and solar plexus, and dodging clear so expertly that Beecher's mauling fists found only empty air.

Once he didn't get away fast enough and a swiping blow felt as though it had torn off one of his ears. It jerked his whole head around and filled it with blooming, buzzing pain. But he shook the darkness from his steely-blue eyes and recovered quickly.

Suddenly, as his knuckles connected solidly against the jaw of the big man. He saw Beecher stopped in midstride.

Knees buckling, a glaze filming his eyes and blood on his face where Morgan's fists had struck and torn, Beecher hung motionless as though propped there. Then, just as though someone had kicked the props from under him, he slewed down in a sprawling heap, and dust whooshed in a tiny cloud as his heavy body struck the earth.

He was not out, but he was through fighting. He lay there dazed and groggy. Morgan, breathing heavily, lifted his glance and let it run in a flat circle over the hard faces in the yard. A second ago their voices had been cheering on the Horseshoe owner, but with Beecher's downfall all sound had sheered off completely and there was only silence.

Wayne Morgan ran a sleeve across his face, mopping away sweat and pushing back the dark hair that had fallen into his eyes. His hat lay at his feet, but he left it there as he spoke his challenge to the watching crew:

"I didn't come here lookin' for a fight, but if anybody else wants to get into this I'll give him the best I can!"

No one spoke for a moment; then, over by the cook shack, a voice that sounded familiar broke the silence:

"You got five minutes to get in the saddle and ride out of here!"

Morgan looked and thought he recognized the shape of the lean, stoop-shouldered man who stood with legs spread,

thumbs hooked in gun-belt. It was the one he had seen last night, in moonlight up there in the Sunstones—Monk Swale. He figured this cool, deliberate man to be Beecher's *segundo*, and more dangerous, probably, than his boss.

In that tense moment, Morgan felt something strike lightly against his ankle. It made a tiny thud as it bounced off into the dirt. He glanced quickly, saw something wrapped in a scrap of paper.

Excitement leaped within him. That shuttered window was directly at his back, and the object had been slipped through a crack in the shutter. It was so small he didn't believe anyone else had seen it.

He shrugged in answer to Monk's order, leaned down for his Stetson, knocked the dirt out of it and dragged it on. And then, deliberately, Wayne Morgan began gathering the quirly papers he had let the wind spill for him. When he straightened, stuffing them into his shirt pocket, he had palmed under the ball of one hard thumb the tiny, paper-wrapped missile.

Jed Beecher was sitting up in the dirt, head hanging, a dribble of blood running from the corner of his smashed mouth. Morgan walked around him, went to the veranda and, still without a word, gathered the reins and swung up to the back of the roan. But then he let a humorless grin touch his bruised lip, and he said dryly into the stillness:

"Well, gents, *hasta la vista*. It always pleasures me to run across a real friendly, open-handed outfit!"

And pulling the head of the roan about, he deliberately set his back to the crowd and rode easily away.

BLUE HAWK

AS SOON as a rise of ground put him out of sight of the ranch, curiosity sent Morgan digging into his pocket for the tiny pellet he had picked from the dirt. It was held together by a rubber band. He slipped this off and unfolded the paper, to reveal a small silver trinket beaten into the shape of a longhorn steer's head.

He thought it must be an ornamental clasp for holding the free ends of a neckcloth. But the paper itself was the important thing. It contained writing, penciled hastily in round, feminine script. He smoothed it out and read:

I don't know who you are, but please help me! Go to Will Emmett, in Grass Valley, and tell him I am being held a prisoner at Horseshoe Ranch by my stepfather. He will be able to think what to do.

There's not much I can offer as a reward, but maybe you can sell this clasp for a dollar or two. Please keep it—and *please* deliver my message!

Brown face grim, eyes turned the color of ice, Wayne Morgan read the note twice through. So the girl was a prisoner! At least, they hadn't harmed her, apparently. He fingered the little ornament; yes, he thought he remembered seeing it at her throat. Val Norris had written this note, and by a fortunate run of circumstances he had discovered what he rode to Horseshoe to learn.

And now, what to do about it?

He considered the name in the message: Will Emmett. The town of Grass Valley, he knew, lay some ten miles to the south and west. A hunch told him the wisest course would be to continue in his role of wandering cowpuncher, deliver the note as he had been requested.

Emmett, whoever he was, seemed to be a friend and confidant of the girl—one whom Val Norris thought she could count on to aid her against her stepfather. Perhaps Morgan could pick up from him further information that he needed.

He pocketed the note and the silver ornament, nudged the roan with spurless heels. He had never been to Grass Valley, but he set a course that ought to take him approximately in the right direction.

He came into the town about midmorning. It was a typical rangeland village—a mere crisscrossing of rutted, unpaved streets, with false-front wooden buildings facing each other across the wide roadways, plank sidewalks lining them haphazardly. A drowsiness lay upon the town, broken by the murmur of a tree-lined creek that ran at its edge.

The largest building, Morgan noticed, was a two-story frame hotel whose painted sign proclaimed it the "GRASS VALLEY HOUSE." Smaller letters underneath announced: "Ira Logan, Proprietor."

This name plucked oddly at Morgan's mind, until he slid around in saddle and looked at a general store he had passed moments before. Yes, there it was: "LOGAN'S MERCANTILE."

He was not particularly surprised when, two doors farther on, he passed a solid-looking brick bank, its plate-glass windows flashing, and saw the brass lettering that spelled out Mr. Logan's name as president.

"Owns the town, looks like," he muttered to himself.

Riding on, he noticed Logan's name on a saloon and a livery barn and a saddle shop before he encountered a man of whom he could ask a question.

"Friend, I'm looking for a man by the name of Emmett. Can you help me out?"

"Second building around the corner," the man informed.

Morgan thanked him and rode that way. It was a short street, ending at the creek bank. Of the three shop buildings that faced upon it, the second was a small frame structure which housed a newspaper office, the *Grass Valley Sentinel.*

He observed with interest, as he put his roan to a hitch-post out front and stepped down, the name of Ira Logan was conspicuous here by its nonappearance. This, it seemed, was one local business enterprise the town's money-boss hadn't taken over for himself.

CHAPTER VI

A Visit to Emmett

NONE of the usual litter of a small, one-man weekly paper was evident in the *Sentinel* building. It was clean and in order, the hand press set in one corner, with the tilted racks of type near by, the marbletop composing tables and a bank of metal file cabinets standing opposite them.

There were three men in the room, gathered about a battered rolltop desk by the front window. None of them was young. A bald-headed, wizened old fellow, hunched on the edge of his chair like a bird perched there, had a leather apron tied about his waist, His crooked fingers were toying with an awl.

Morgan guessed he might be a shoemaker or saddler—maybe the Hod Jenkins whose name he had noticed on a tiny saddler's shop next to the newspaper office.

The second man, neatly dressed and

with soft, white skin over a thin body that gave him something of a fragile look, leaned against a corner of the desk. They both glanced up as Wayne Morgan's broad shape darkened the open doorway. But he passed them over with a glance and put his attention on the third member of the trio, who sat at the desk, a pencil in his hand and long strips of galley proof before him.

"Emmett?" asked Morgan.

"You're looking at him."

The editor laid down his pencil, and waited. He was a clean-cut figure, not softened by age or by confining deskwork. Morgan placed him in his middle fifties—a man with graying hair, but a fighter still to judge by the set of his jaw and the level scrutiny of undimmed brown eyes.

It would take a fighter to hold his own independence in the face of the greedy power of a man such as Ira Logan seemed to be, judging from the way Logan's name was plastered all over Grass Valley.

Morgan was fishing Val Norris' note from a pocket as he came forward from the doorway.

"Howdy, gents," he said. "My name's Wayne Morgan. Sorry if I'm interrupting something, but there's a matter that may be of some importance."

He placed the paper in front of Will Emmett and smoothed it out with his thumb, and dropped the silver steer head on top.

"The note will explain itself," he added. "And I don't want any pay. You can give this trinket back to the person it came from."

He saw immediate interest seize the trio. The frail-looking man blurted out, "Why, that belongs to the Norris girl!"

Will Emmett quickly pushed aside the galley proofs he had been correcting, snatched up the note and read it through twice, the second time aloud. Sounds of astonishment broke from his listeners, and when Emmett lifted his head sharply his eyes had a smolder back in them somewhere and a white line of tense muscle lay along his jaw.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded harshly.

"Now, wait a minute!" Morgan let his own glance narrow a trifle. "I don't think I care for your tone!"

"I didn't mean to imply anything," Emmett said quickly. "Not knowing you from Adam, there'd be no reason to. But"—he indicated the silver trinket—"Doc Harriman was right: this belongs to a young lady that we all know very well, and respect. Furthermore, the note is in her writing. I insist you tell us everything you know about them."

So Wayne Morgan, without further prodding, related the happenings of that morning at Horseshoe. In the narration he stuck to his role of fiddle-footed cowpuncher, repeating the story he had given Jed Beecher upon his arrival at the ranch. He remarked briefly on his fight with the big rancher, but though he passed over it in a few words he saw the growing respect it put into his hearers.

With almost incredulous looks, they scanned the lean frame of this stranger, as though not quite able to picture anyone besting the tough rancher. There was a slight bruise on Morgan's cheek, however, to lend its own support to the fact of his having been in a battle of some kind.

Finishing, he said, "I reckon this stepdaughter of Beecher's saw I was no friend of his," he said in conclusion, "and she took the chance to slip her message out to me. Luckily, I managed to pick it up and palm it without any of the crowd knowin' what I had. An' I brought it straight to you as directed. I'm afraid that's about all I got to tell."

THE WORDS were hardly out of his mouth before the tense atmosphere of the room erupted in angry excitement. The old saddlemaker came leaping to his feet, kicking back his chair.

"That Beecher!" he cried, fury trembling his voice. "Dang it, this is one time him and his tough crew have gone out of bounds. We'll go out there to Horseshoe and we'll—"

"Yeah, we'll *what?*" the medico prompted him, a look of cynicism on his waxen face. "Three old men to face Jed Beecher and his hardcases and force them to turn their prisoner loose! Can you really picture it?" He shook his head. "Nobody in his right mind would tackle that tough crew."

Emmett, the newspaperman, sat staring straight ahead at the papers on his desk, his face mirroring bleak thoughts. He lifted ink-stained fingers, ran them across his graying shock of hair.

"But there's *got* to be something done!" he ground out.

Wayne Morgan had been watching and listening; he said now, "The law, maybe?"

"Law!" snorted the doctor, angrily. "Try and find any on this range! The county seat is sixty miles away. We used to have a town marshal in Grass Valley, but he was bushwhacked two years ago and the office has stood empty since."

"But we're still men!" old Hod Jenkins cried, not relinquishing his violent theme. "Old and stove-up, maybe, but there's got to be *somebody* left on this range to put up a fight when there's need of one! And now, that nice little girl is in real trouble and she's called on us for help. We gonna let her down?"

"I'd be glad to lend a hand," put in Wayne Morgan quickly.

The editor looked at him. "And get in more trouble for yourself, after having tangled with Beecher once already?"

"Don't discourage him, Will!" Doc Harriman grunted, harshly. "If the bunch of us are going to be dang fools and risk our necks—and it looks like we are—then we can make use of a pair of tied-down six-guns!"

One bony hand indicated the deadly black-butted Colts jutting from Morgan's holsters.

"Goshamighty, yes!" cried the old saddler, clapping a hand against the shoulder of the stranger. "The fella that could beat up Jed Beecher, we got plenty to thank him for already. And if he wants to side us he's plenty welcome! Let's get hosses and guns and hit the road before worse has time to happen!"

Suddenly, Will Emmett was on his feet, resolution on his strong features as he reached for his hat on a wall peg above the desk. He looked at the doctor.

"Hod's right," he said. "We can't sit here, with Val Norris in danger from that bullying stepfather of hers. And you, Morgan"—he looked at the stranger, nodded—"you're surely more than welcome, if you honestly feel you want to come along. We'll meet under the big cottonwood at the edge of town, in five minutes."

"I'll be there," Morgan said.

He went out to the street, mounted the roan and moved away from the news office at a slow walk, frowning over the scene he'd witnessed there. He had learned nothing new, really, but he felt that he had tapped some of the strength and the weakness of this country.

In the persons of those three men—in Doc Harriman's tired cynicism, in wizened Hod Jenkins' exasperated demands for action however futile, in Will Emmett's solid, reasoned approach to the problem—he saw a token of some of the conflicting attitudes and uncertainties that had this range divided against itself. And this explained a lot of things.

By fostering this split in opinion, and by keeping men's minds and actions paralyzed by fear of the tough crowd that hung out at Horseshoe, Beecher and the unknown chief for whom he acted were able to keep down any effective rise of opposition, or any undue curiosity about the goings-on at the ranch or in the adjoining Sunstone badlands.

Only thus could they keep the organization functioning smoothly, the flow of contraband and owlhoot traffic running unchecked through the secret hideout and shuttling back and forth across the State line.

It had been rumor of such crime that had brought Wayne Morgan—the Masked Rider—to the Sunstone hill country. If criminals were there, it was his duty to root them out.

But this affair of the imprisonment of Val Norris, by rousing indignation and uniting the efforts of even three resolute men, might prove a bombshell to break the setup wide open. Such, at least, was Wayne Morgan's rising hope.

He had reached this point in his thoughts when he heard a voice on the sidewalk exclaim: "Good morning, Mr. Logan!"

QUICKLY, Wayne Morgan lifted his head, saw the speaker—a small cattleman, by the looks of him—touch hat-brim obsequiously in greeting to a man who had just stepped out upon the steps of the brick bank. Morgan shifted his look to Ira Logan, gave him a narrow attention.

The man was solid as his bank, his stiff shoulders bearing the importance of the name that was smeared over half this town. He gave scant notice to the greeting that had been tendered him. He was

a rather short man, with more than a hint of paunch. His clothing was tailored, expensive. A pomposity showed in the very way he held himself, and in his broad face the little eyes held intelligence and cunning.

His eyes met Wayne Morgan's and held closely on the stranger's face as the latter went on unhurriedly along the empty, sun-filled street. Morgan wondered if he had been too open in his scrutiny, or if Logan was simply one who made it a point to observe every strange rider that passed through his town.

Morgan was the first at the cottonwood. One by one the three townsmen joined him, mounted, and with guns strapped on and looking out of place about their waists. Without a word they paired off and took the looping trail to Horseshoe Ranch. Morgan, riding stirrup-to-stirrup with the old saddlemaker, asked Hod Jenkins a question:

"How does your friend Logan get along with the crowd at Horseshoe?"

"How does—huh?" The old man shot him a blank look of incomprehension. "What do you mean, 'get along?' He don't have nothing to do with 'em, any more than the rest of us."

"But don't they ever come into town of a Saturday night and get likkered up and rambunctious? I'd think, with all the property Ira Logan owns in Grass Valley, he'd be some nervous those tough-acting gents would get out of hand and smash things up."

All at once, Jenkins' brow was dragged down in a scowl. "I dunno what you're hinting at! Ira Logan is the most important gent in Grass Valley. You certainly haven't any reason to try and link him up with a tough loudmouth like that Jed Beecher!"

Morgan looked around him. All three of the townsmen were looking at him, Doc Harriman sharing the old saddler's obvious disapproval, and even Will Emmett—whom he had somehow thought of as a rebel against the banker's dominance of his community—showing a dislike of the stranger's insinuation.

He shrugged. "Just thinkin' out loud," he said, dismissing the subject. "Naturally I wouldn't know anything about it."

He decided right then that any suspicions or ideas he had would have to be kept to himself. These men's minds were closed, their vision dazzled, by Ira Logan's wealth and local power. They weren't ready to listen to any other suggestions.

Morgan kept his mouth shut, thereafter. The four riders were silent with a growing tension, during most of the ride to Horseshoe.

CHAPTER VII

Countercharges

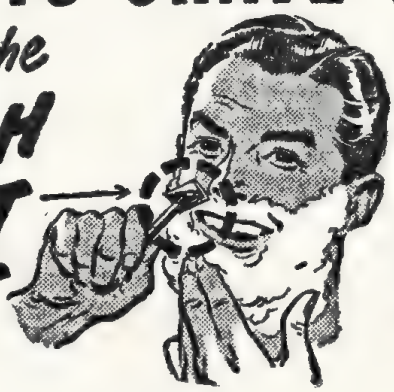
SOMNOLENT quiet hovered over the ranch in this hour just short of noon. Hammer strokes on heated steel came ringing across the stillness from a small blacksmith shop beyond the hay barn. The grim-faced visitors saw Jed Beecher working there over the anvil, and of one accord they turned their broncs in that direction.

The tough Horseshoe crew saw them ride in. At once, silent men were on their feet and trailing the newcomers, closing in

[*Turn page*]

HATE TO SHAVE YOUR UPPER LIP?

Make the TOUGH SPOT TEST



Try a Star Blade on those tough stubble patches —those spots where whiskers are wiry and skin tender. Feel the smoother, better shave you get. Sturdier Star Blades are precision-made to take and hold a sharper edge. Try better shaving at a real saving.

STAR

SINGLE OR DOUBLE EDGE BLADES 10¢ and 25¢ Pkgs.

behind them under the hot sunlight, an air of dangerous waiting about them.

"Keep the eyes in the back of your heads peeled!" growled old Hod Jenkins, glancing around uneasily at the menace of those gunhung men.

They rode straight to the wide door of the smithy and reined up there, facing the big Horseshoe boss.

Jed Beecher was shaping an iron for an ugly, hammerheaded bay gelding. Thick torso stripped and gleaming with sweat that runneled through the matted black hair on his barrel-chest, the man quickly laid down his tools and strode out of the building's gloom. His face, swollen and cut, showed the effects of his recent tangle with Wayne Morgan. A black scowl crossed his heavy features as he saw the latter.

"You!" he grunted, eyes narrowing. The fingers of his big right paw twisted, hanging close to the holstered gun at his thigh. But he didn't draw it. "I've heard of gents with nerve, but you beat the deck —comin' back here!"

Wayne Morgan returned his stare levelly, easing to a comfortable seat on the back of the roan. This was not his show, and he let Will Emmett open the ball by bringing out Val Norris' note and thrusting it at the Horseshoe boss.

"We won't waste time, Beecher," the newspaperman said crisply. "We want an explanation of this, and we want it quick!"

Scowling, Beecher snatched the paper and glanced over it. His expression turned blacker; the note crumpled in his thick fingers as he jerked his head up and speared Emmett with a sharp glare.

"What is this thing?" he demanded. "Where'd you get it?"

"He got it from me," said Morgan, flatly. "All three of these gents say it was written by your stepdaughter. So it must have been her that passed it out the window to me, this morning when I was here."

"You're holdin' her prisoner, you varmint," old Hod Jenkins added vehemently, "and there's no use tryin' to deny it! So you better trot her out. We aims to take her with us when we leave!"

Tensed, ready for anything to happen, Wayne Morgan watched the angry working of Beecher's face, heard the undercurrent of dangerous muttering that ran through the Horseshoe toughs ranged behind him and his companions. But what actually happened next was far removed from whatever might have been expected.

"So *that's* your dirty game!" Beecher gritted, his stare boring directly at Morgan. "You think you can use blackmail to dig outa me what extortion wouldn't get. And you figure to make these three gents your catspaws. Well, I'm callin' your bluff, mister! Only, this time, you don't get off with anything as light as a beatin' up!"

Utterly amazed, Morgan stared back at him, unable to find an answer. Will Emmett turned a puzzled look on him.

"What's he talking about, Morgan?" he asked.

"I'll tell you!" boomed Jed Beecher. "I'll tell you just what kind of fools you've let be made of you. This hombre"—he stabbed a thick forefinger at Wayne Morgan—"is a dirty kidnaper! He's holdin' my daughter somewhere in the hills! Picked her up this morning when she was out riding. And he had the nerve to come here, told me I had to fork over twenty thousand if I wanted to see her alive again. I should of killed him but I didn't dare, for Val's sake. Instead, I gave him a beatin' and kicked him off the ranch.

"And so he went to you," Beecher raged on, "showed you a letter he must have forced the girl to write, and talked you into backing his play. *That's* the deal you've got yourselves into, gents!"

IT WAS an amazing piece of acting, and convincing enough to put doubt in the eyes of Morgan's three companions as they turned to him for an answer to this countercharge.

"Val Norris is a prisoner on this ranch, Beecher, and you know it!" Morgan said hotly. "And it will be easy proved if you dare let us take a look into that room behind the shuttered windows!"

Beecher didn't bat an eye. "What room?"

Wayne Morgan twisted around in the saddle. For the first time, he saw that the windows that had been tight closed in the wing of the house, only a couple of hours before, now stood wide open, with the breeze off the flats fanning lacy curtains. He knew then that Jed Beecher had

bested him in the playing of this hand. The Horseshoe boss must have guessed, somehow, that Morgan had learned something about the prisoner in that room and had taken the precaution of moving her.

As Morgan straightened slowly about, trying to figure the next move, he found himself looking straight into the muzzle of Beecher's drawn six-gun.

"Gents," Beecher told the three puzzled townsmen, "you got my permission to look through every building on this spread, if it'll take that to show you what monkeys you've let this slick-talkin' drifter make out of you. When you're convinced my stepdaughter ain't here, then you can get the hell out and we'll forget the things you tried to accuse me of.

"But friend Morgan here is stayin' right where he is!" Beecher went on. "I've had all I aim to take from him. I'll strip the hide off him this time, if I have to, but I'll find out from him where my daughter is! And if it turns out he's hurt her in any way, I'll do even worse!"

Morgan's fingers itched to wrap themselves around a gun butt, but he couldn't beat a drawn weapon. Or the unseen guns of the tough hombres at his back, who he knew would be primed to start shooting at the first sign of a suspicious move. Helpless, he pinned his icy glare on Beecher.

"He's lying, men!" he gritted. "I dunno how I can prove it, but for the sake of that girl, you've *got* to believe me!"

But when he looked at the three elderly townsmen, he found little belief in the cold stares they gave him.

Doc Harriman spread waxen hands, gaunt shoulders lifting in a shrug of cynicism. "When two men call each other liars, trying to decide which one to believe is a hopeless proposition. But it occurs to me that we don't know the first thing about you, Morgan. The tale you told us was a pretty wild one, even with that note to back it up. On the other hand, Jed Beecher here just hasn't got the brains to cook up a lie of equally fantastic proportions.

"No," he went on, blandly, ignoring the curse that Beecher hurled at him, "between the two of you, I guess I'll have to believe Beecher, little use though I have for him!"

"Looks like you're right, Doc," old Hod Jenkins nodded, grimly. "After all, even a hombre like Beecher would hardly have any cause to pick on his own stepdaughter. Yeah, looks like we was sold."

"You're making a bad mistake!" cried Wayne Morgan, tensely. "One you may regret for the rest of your lives!"

"If the bunch of you are convinced," said Jed Beecher, cutting him off, "then start riding and let me get to work on this hellion. This time, I'll make him talk if I have to kill him doin' it!"

"And serves him right," old Jenkins agreed hotly. "Fella like that ain't fit to live! Danged kidnaper!"

And then even Will Emmett, whose logical mind had seemed slowest of the three to convince, gave in. With a troubled frown, and not meeting Wayne Morgan's eyes directly, he picked up the reins of his horse.

"I guess there's nothing for us to do here," he said. "Unless you think we ought to take a look around to make sure—"

"Heck, no!" growled the old saddlemaker. "We've wasted enough time. Let's hit the trail and give Beecher a chance to work on this slick-talkin' skunk."

Doc Harriman had already turned his mount. Icy despair in him, Wayne Morgan sat and watched the townsmen ride away. A dead silence filtered in as trail dust muffled the receding hoofbeats. And then a cold, malicious chuckle brought Morgan around to face Jed Beecher.

"Well, pardner!" Evil humor was in the big rancher's lopsided, smirking grin. The gun was held dead-enter on his prisoner. "You walked into something that time, didn't you? That's the kind of thing that's apt to happen to a drifter when he gets too nosy!" He waggled the gun. "Climb outa leather!"

"What do you figure to do with me?"

"That there is for the Chief to decide," grunted Beecher. "Now, off that bronc before we shoot you off!"

THERE was no disputing the authority of that naked gun, and yet it graveled Morgan to surrender into the hands of his enemies without a last-ditch fight. Once helpless and unarmed, his fate would be sealed beyond his power of saving himself. But as long as a man was free, and had his guns—

Slowly, Morgan lifted his right foot out of stirrup, weight on his left leg as he prepared to step down at Beecher's gun-backed order. But at the last instant the side of his right boot suddenly drove hard against the flank of the roan. As the bronc, startled, made a bucking hop toward the waiting Beecher, Morgan launched himself from saddle.

Beecher involuntarily started to back away as the horse lunged toward him. The gun drew off the mark for an instant, and it was then that Wayne Morgan's leap carried him smashing full-tilt into the Horseshoe boss.

A yell broke from the hardcase crew, but no one tried a shot because the roan cut off their view of what was happening. And after that, Morgan and Beecher were caught in close grapple and a shot would have endangered the Horseshoe boss.

That was what Morgan had figured on, and he forced the small advantage it gave him. Crowding Beecher, he sought with his left hand to get a grip on that waving six-gun, and with the right he drove a hard-fisted blow into the man's body. His knuckles spatted off the naked, black-matted chest.

Beecher fell back a step, breath whooshing from him. Morgan waded after him, found the man's gun wrist and clamped a solid hold on it. His right hand dropped swiftly toward holster in an effort to get his own weapon into play. His fingers barely brushed gun butt.

Then Beecher, stumbling backward, tripped on something and went down rolling, and Morgan, pulled off balance by the hand he had clamped on the man's wrist, was jerked off his feet.

He landed heavily on his side. He lost his hold on Beecher, was dazed momentarily by the force of his fall. Then Beecher was upon him, the whole weight of the man's barrel-like body landing full and hard in his middle.

Wayne Morgan had licked this man once before, but only by staying clear of the reach of those slab-muscled arms and thick, groping fingers. Now, before he could manage to break clear, one of those meaty hands had found a throttling hold and was squeezing inexorably at his throat.

Morgan jerked and bucked, trying to tear loose of it. He drove terrific punches into Beecher's naked torso. He smashed a blow against the side of the man's bullet head that must have hurt, because Beecher grunted and the throttling grip on Morgan's throat eased for a second.

With a mighty heave, Morgan dislodged the weight of the man, rolled clear, dragging air into his tortured throat. He came catlike to hands and knees, bracing for a lunge. It was then that a gun in the hands of one of the Horseshoe toughs came streaking down from behind and above him.

He caught the movement from the corner of his eye, tried hard to twist aside but didn't quite make it. The gun barrel struck the edge of his skull, glanced off his shoulder. And Wayne Morgan dropped beneath the clubbing blow, strength gone out of him.

He did not quite lose consciousness, but all impressions were blurred and distorted by the pounding throb of pain in his skull, and he lacked the will or the energy to move. He heard voices through the buzzing in his ears, knew that he was being half-dragged, half-carried across the hard-packed dirt of the yard.

Morgan took a momentary dip into the black void that gaped below him, then, because the next he knew he was sprawled in a chair and someone was jerking at his hands and feet, using saddle rope to tie him there securely.

His head was clearing; he lifted it to peer about him with aching eyes. He figured he must be in a room in the ranchhouse itself. There was a bed with a frilly cover on it, a dressing table with a woman's toilet articles on it and, in a picture frame, the smiling photograph of Val Norris.

This much Morgan noted before the slam of a shutter at the window blurred the light in the room.

Featured Next Issue

•

TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES

A Wayne Morgan Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER VIII

Trailed by Blue Hawk

WHEN he turned his head, Morgan saw Jed Beecher moving from window to window, reaching out to pull the wooden shutters across each opening.

As his men finished with their tie-job, Beecher swung around and came to where the prisoner sat securely bound. He tested the knots, stepped back and grinned wickedly down at Morgan. Blood streaked his face, and the sweat and dirt had made a muddy smear of his bare torso.

"Full of tricks, ain't you?" he grunted. Without warning, he swung back a meaty palm, brought it sharply across the prisoner's helpless face, twice. "That's a little payment for some of the marks you've left on my hide today! Now, you set there awhile and do a little considerin' of just how smart it is for a drifter to go around stickin' his nose into things that don't concern him!"

Wayne Morgan tongued his lip, that had split under the force of Beecher's open-palmed blow. He said grimly: "If you've hurt that girl—"

"She ain't hurt!" the Horseshoe boss growled harshly. "She was another one that got too nosy and shoved herself into trouble. But, bucko, they ain't either of you gonna be in a position to make any *more* trouble! Understand?" He looked at his men, motioned them to the door with a jerk of his head. To Wayne Morgan he added, "Come evening, we'll take you to see the Chief. Until then, you got nothin' to do but sit there. Take it easy, pardner!"

Picking up the twin belts and black guns that had been taken from the prisoner, he hefted them, a gleam in his narrowed eyes. Then the weight of his heavy tread shook the floor a little as he tramped across the room and out. A key turned in the lock, the pound of boots receded.

At once, Wayne Morgan hurled himself at the knots that held him, tearing and struggling to get free. He strained in his bonds until blood oozed on chafed wrists, but the tying had been too well done and he couldn't loosen the ropes a particle. He had to give up finally, and sagged loosely in the chair as he panted from the futile effort. He wasn't going to break loose from his imprisonment, that much was sure.

He looked around him in the dim light that filtered through a crack or two in the shutters. This, he felt sure, was that same room in the wing where Val Norris had been held prisoner and from which she had slipped her desperate message out to him. Now he was a prisoner there. The swift and incredible turn of events had him bewildered.

Well, he had Beecher's promise that sometime before the day was out he would have his chance to meet the Chief —the mysterious figure whose organization had its headquarters at Horseshoe Ranch and its secret base of operations back in the Sunstone badlands. But Morgan wanted to face him with his hands free, and maybe over blazing guns. Not this way, not to hear his own death sentence.

Unless he could manage to escape, a cutbank grave somewhere in the lost vastness of the badlands would be Wayne Morgan's destiny. And escape seemed entirely out of the question.

Time wore on. The air in that shuttered room was stifling. Renewed attempts to break free of his bonds had Wayne Morgan limp and wet with scalding sweat as the afternoon dragged out. There was nothing to look at but the slow shifting of penciled light from the shutters' cracks as the sun dropped westward outside the gloomy walls of the room. That, and the smiling picture of the girl, the pathetic scattering of her personal items about the room.

Morgan had managed to hitch his chair close enough to the dressing table to look it over in the hope of finding a pair of scissors, or even a nail file, that might serve to cut him loose. Apparently, any such potential tools had been removed.

IT WAS pretty close to sunset, he supposed, when Jed Beecher unlocked the door and strode in heavily. He crossed the floor to stand gloating at Morgan, and the first thing the latter noticed about him was that Beecher had the prisoner's twin belts and guns strapped about his waist. Beecher saw the direction of his angry

glance and he grinned, slapped the holsters with either hand.

"Nice hardware, pardner," he gloated. "You kept 'em in good shape, and I like the trigger action. So I'm keepin' 'em for my own personal use. You ought to be flattered!"

"Somehow, I ain't," said Morgan bleakly. "I'm some particular about who wears those guns!"

Beecher only shrugged. "You ain't gonna be needin' 'em again," he promised indifferently. "We're heading for the hideout, *pronto,* to let the Chief make up his mind what becomes of you. Our hosses are waitin' outside."

"You think you can get rid of me easy, don't you?" Morgan said coolly. "You figure when I've dropped out of the picture nobody will ever miss me again. But I want to warn you, Jed: There's a certain friend of mine who might learn about it. And if he ever does, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. None at all!"

"Yeah?" snarled the big man. "And just who might be this 'friend', who's so danged scary?"

Morgan waited a moment for the effect and then let him have it:

"The Masked Rider!"

He had thought he might throw a scare into the big man, give him something to think about, and he saw it hit like a stick of dynamite. He saw the fear that flickered into Beecher's muddy eyes, to be quickly smothered by a false bluster.

"Aw, you're talkin' to hear yourself speak!" Beecher blustered. "You can't make me believe you know that masked galoot, or that he'd give a hang about a nameless drifter!"

"You think not?"

As the Horseshoe boss was speaking, Morgan's glance had moved past him toward the door Beecher had left open when he came into the room. At what he saw, an exclamation almost broke from him, but he stifled it and shifted his look quickly back to the big man, hoping his face wouldn't reveal anything.

"Maybe I can prove it," he said. "You ever hear of a fellow named Blue Hawk?"

"Sure," grunted Beecher. "Who ain't heard of the Masked Rider's Injun sidekick?"

Morgan's lips moved in a tight smile. "Then you might just turn around and take a look in the doorway behind you. But real easy—"

"Yes, Senor!" The soft voice behind him jerked Jed Beecher to a frozen, stricken halt. "Plenty careful! This rifle is pointed right between the shoulders of that dirty shirt you're wearing!"

* * * * *

It had been toward midafternoon when Blue Hawk left the hidden camp in the Sunstone badlands and worked southward onto the grassy rangeland. The Yaqui didn't often go against the suggestions of his white saddle pard, to whose judgment and experience he generally deferred in matters of strategy. But today a restlessness settled on him, and a feeling that he ought to be in saddle and doing something useful.

Dan Kent was resting well. His fever was down, and he had eaten heartily and seemed in excellent shape, though very weak still. But with food and water handy, there was really nothing Blue Hawk could do for him. He didn't like sitting around waiting, not when he knew Wayne Morgan had ridden to Horseshoe Ranch that morning and that he might even then be in danger at the hands of that tough outfit.

Of course, Blue Hawk knew that Morgan could be depended on to take care of himself. Yet some half-buried savage instinct perhaps worked in Blue Hawk, and finally it put him onto the back of the pinto and sent him riding out, not knowing what he expected to find but feeling somehow better to be in action.

He found Horseshoe Ranch with no difficulty, but from the cover of a hill behind the ranch a long survey of the outfit told him nothing. He watched there for a good part of an hour, seeing the meaningless activity in the yard and about the buildings, noting there were a lot of men who seemed to have no particular business at all.

Blue Hawk saw, too, that the windows in a wing of the ranchhouse had its shutters tightly closed and wondered at this. There was no sign at all of Morgan, however, or of the roan. Maybe Wayne Morgan hadn't come here, after all.

Blue Hawk was about to pull away, not knowing where he would ride next, when

he saw a couple of horsemen leave the spread and canter off along a south trail. Thinking that everything he could learn about the activities of the men of Horseshoe would be just so much to the good, the Yaqui hurried to the grazing pinto, leaped astride and sent him forward with a kick of moccasined heels.

It was no trick to follow the pair of riders, since they had no inkling that anyone was on their trail and so held close to the road. Blue Hawk kept a considerable distance behind them, staying in the roughs a mile to the west of the trail.

Presently, he discovered the huddled buildings of a town lying on the flats beside a restless stream, and guessed at once that this was Grass Valley and that it was the goal of the Horseshoe riders.

THIS determined, Blue Hawk left the trail and pressed ahead behind a curtain of grassy swells, so that he came upon the town a little ahead of the easy-gaited horsemen. He tied the pinto in a cover of willows along the creek and left it there.

A short time later, a stolid, expressionless Yaqui Indian in cheap drill clothing moved along the dusty street of Grass Valley, moccasins padding the dust. Nothing about him suggested that sharp black eyes were making a quick sweep of the weathered buildings, and that keen ideas were building behind the blank façade of coppery, sharp-hewn features.

When he wanted to, Blue Hawk could look and act exactly like a stupid and illiterate Indian—a figure that no one noticed as he slouched through the streets of the cowtown, studying and noting carefully every face, every building that crossed his sight.

He stopped in the shadow of a wooden arcade, now, and lounged with his back against the clapboards of a saloon wall. His arms were folded and his seemingly lifeless glance ranged the length of the dusty street, waiting for a glimpse of the horsemen he had trailed from Beecher's spread.

There was a silence over the town at this hour of afternoon. Across the street, the door of the bank opened and Ira Logan emerged, paused on the top step a moment to adjust the careful hang of his expensive coat and the exact setting of his stiff beaver. Then he set off along the sidewalk with his ponderous and solid stride.

The watching Yaqui identified him without trouble. He had already noted the predominance of Logan's name on most of the business places of town. Interested, he followed the figure of the banker with a veiled glance as the money man strode a half block from the bank and turned up the broad steps of the hotel, which was another of his properties.

At the same moment, two dusty riders turned into sight at the corner of the street, and Blue Hawk saw that they were the ones he was watching for.

They pulled up quickly, and they were looking at the portly back of the banker who was just disappearing through the wide door of the hotel lobby. Then, at a word from one of the pair, they put their broncs to the hitch-rack and swung down. They tied up and, ducking under the pole, moved across the wooden sidewalk and hurried up the steps of the hotel.

At once Blue Hawk, sensing something interesting, left his post and drifted up the street without seeming haste, to take up a new position near a side window on the ground floor of the hotel.

Again he folded his arms, placed his broad shoulders against the white clapboards. To a casual observer he might well have looked half asleep, but his sharp ears were attuned to any sound that might come through the open sash close beside his head.

From the pleasant odors that reached his nostrils, he guessed at once that this was the hotel's dining room, even before a woman's voice said almost in his ear:

"Good day, Mr. Logan. The usual afternoon coffee?"

"Yes," said a curt, deep rumble of a voice. "Cream, but no sugar."

"Anything to go with it?"

"No."

Twisting his head slightly, Blue Hawk could see that Logan had taken the table directly by the open window. He could see the strong, impatient fingers of the banker drumming a dancing rhythm on the table top. The waitress left him with a quick tapping of heels on hard wood.

These sounds had scarcely died when heavy boots tramped toward the banker's table. A chair scraped as it was pulled

back and one of the men from Horseshoe dropped into it. The other man apparently remained standing. Blue Hawk saw the immaculate fingers stop their drumming.

"What are you doing here, Monk?" said Logan sharply. "I told you once you were never to try to contact me anywhere but—"

"Couldn't be helped," cut in a voice, which Blue Hawk remembered from last night. Monk Swale added, "Beecher told me to see you *pronto*, and there wasn't time to wait."

What Logan might have answered went unspoken, for the waitress returned just then with the coffee he had ordered. A silence fell and lasted for the moment it took her to set the cup before him, the spoon and cream pitcher. She asked Monk Swale if he wanted to order, but the Horseshoe foreman only grunted at her. But as soon as she was out of earshot, he spoke up.

"Beecher wants some money," he said.

"Shut up!" snapped Logan sharply. "Keep your voice down, can't you? You know what it would mean if anybody heard you!"

And after that, although Blue Hawk strained to hear, their lowered tones came to him as a mere hum of sound. This went on for a minute or two, while the coffee cup sat untouched and cooling on the table. Then Blue Hawk saw a stuffed leather wallet in Logan's hand, saw the banker remove a chunk of greenbacks from it and drop them on the table, saw Monk Swale's dark-furred paw come forward and sweep the money up. Then the chair scraped again as the Horseshoe foreman swung to his feet.

"All right," he said, his voice louder now, "I'll tell Beecher what you said. But I think he—"

The voice broke off. The chair was hurled aside and Monk Swale's gaunt frame pawed past it to get to the open window.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

SCHOOLMARM DIVINE

A Cactus County Story

By L. P. HOLMES

CHAPTER IX

Escape

IT WAS too late for Blue Hawk to heed the warning that he had been seen. He didn't try to move away, since that would be the clearest confession of spying. He stayed motionless.

"Hey, you! Hey, John Injun!" the Horseshoe foreman said sharply. "You speakum English, mebbe so? Look up here!"

Blue Hawk tilted his head, showed a vacant, dull-eyed face to the man framed in the window above him. He didn't say anything.

"You been listening to our talk, you danged redskin?" snapped Swale viciously.

Hawk grinned vacantly, held up a palm. "Grub, mebbeso? You givum handout pore Injun?"

The Horseshoe foreman made a grimace of disgust. "Do your beggin' around at the kitchen after this, you danged heathen! Now, go on! Get off the street, you hear me?"

"Me savvy, Senor." Blue Hawk bobbed his head, grinning, and started padding away obediently in his moccasins.

Behind him he heard one of Swale's companions say, "What was it? An Injun?" And then: "Hey, wait a minute! Ain't that Masked Rider supposed to have an Injun pard he travels with?"

Even before the first yell to halt, Blue Hawk was running lightly. He left the excited trio clustered in the window, and within seconds was out of sight and heading for the pinto where he had left it tethered by the creek.

They never had a chance to catch him, even if they had wanted to give pursuit. Blue Hawk was too canny a master at laying a false trail and losing himself in the open swells of grassy range. Within a very few minutes he knew he had shaken any pursuit and was pushing northward again, his keen brain working at the meaning of the things he had seen and heard under that open window at the hotel.

There was still no sign of Wayne Morgan, and Hawk's anxious thoughts re-

turned to the mission that had brought him down out of the Sunstones. The day was getting old when he once more pulled up on a rise commanding the Horseshoe layout.

Torn between the decision to search for his friend, or to return to the wounded man in the badlands camp, he gave the buildings below him an intent appraisal—and came up in stirrups as he saw a man leading a pair of horses, saddled and bridled, across the yard to the house. He tied them, swung up the steps and disappeared through the front door.

One of those broncs was Wayne Morgan's roan—but the man was not Wayne Morgan! And Blue Hawk knew then that he would have to find some way to get into that house, learn for himself just what was going on.

* * * * *

Big Jed Beecher turned more than one color as he stood there facing the rifle in the hands of Blue Hawk, his fingers working but not quite daring to make a play for one of the stolen guns riding his hip holsters.

"You would lift your hands a little higher, maybe?" Blue Hawk said. "It would be safer."

And as Beecher's arms went up reluctantly to shoulder level, Wayne Morgan grinned at his friend in the doorway.

"Good work, Hawk! How in the world did you find me?"

The Yaqui grinned a little in return. For Beecher's benefit, he said, "My friend the Masked Rider, he tell me you are in trouble here, Senor. So I come. My pinto I left on the hill behind the ranch and came down on foot. I think they are blind men on this ranch, for I had no trouble at all sneaking in through the back of the house. And then I saw the door of this room standing open and heard your voices talking."

"Nobody's seen you? You're sure?" And at Hawk's quick nod, Morgan added: "Better come inside and close the door, just to play safe. And you, Beecher—get to work and untie these ropes, *pronto!*"

The Horseshoe boss started to balk, but a gesture with the muzzle of Hawk's saddle gun decided him. As he fumbled at the knots and set Wayne Morgan free, the two friends discussed their next move.

"We could maybe get out the same way I came in, without being seen," Blue Hawk suggested. "But your roan and another horse are tied at the front, Senor. And of course, we want the roan."

"That's right," Morgan agreed. As the last of the ropes fell away he came to his feet, chafing torn wrists and feeling the acute pain of blood returning to numbed, cramped limbs. "And we can use the extra bronc, for Beecher here."

"Huh?" the big man exclaimed harshly. "What do you think you're gonna do with me?"

"Why, I figure to take you with us," Morgan told him pleasantly. "There's some questions I want answers to, and you're the gent I aim to dig them out of . . . Oh, no you don't!"

RAGE had almost sent Beecher's big paws toward the holstered guns, but the warning and the menace of Blue Hawk's rifle caught him up. Then Morgan stepped in and unhooked the twin belts, a moment later had them snugged in place about his own lean thighs.

"Right obliging of you to take care of my guns until I needed them again," he said.

Then he adjusted the hang of the holsters, slid a black-butted gun into his big fist and set the muzzle of it against Beecher's thick middle.

"All right!" he snapped. "Blue Hawk, you better leave the way you came. Friend Beecher and me will just walk out there, get on our horses and ride out of the yard . . . . Anybody says anything, Beecher, you tell 'em we're heading for the hideout. And if anything goes wrong, or someone tries to stop us, it'll mean a bullet in your hide! That understood?"

The click of the hammer being thumbed back gave somber emphasis to the warning.

Beecher's face was a pasty color, and the sweat of fear already stood in beads on his forehead.

"All right, all right!" he exclaimed tightly. "I ain't wantin' to commit suicide!"

Blue Hawk had the door of the room open a crack. "Nobody in the hall, Senor," he reported softly. "I think the house is empty."

"Good enough." Morgan prodded his prisoner with the barrel. "Move out, friend!"

Then they were going through the sprawling ranchhouse, to the wide living room where the heavy plank door stood open to the sunset. Blue Hawk had moved off, silent as a shadow, down the dark hall to the rear of the building, carrying his rifle.

As Morgan stepped out upon the veranda, crowding close behind Beecher, he slipped his gun back into holster but kept a hand on it. He hoped no one would notice that he had his crossed belts back again.

All went well. The dozen men in the yard were over by the corrals, raising a cloud of dust as they roped out mounts and worked to throw gear on them, swearing at the salty animals. None were very near the house. Beecher hesitated.

"Go on!" Morgan said sharply. "Right down the steps and into saddle. If anybody starts throwing lead, you'll get the first bullet!"

Morgan wouldn't shoot an unarmed man, not even such a one as Jed Beecher. But the Horseshoe boss didn't know that, and he walked ahead of Morgan like a man treading eggs, the back of his neck red and shiny with sweat. He went directly to his bronc, was reaching for stirrup when someone called through the dust of the yard.

"Ain't you waitin' for the rest of us, Jed?" the voice queried.

"No," Beecher answered in a voice hoarse with strain. "We'll pull out ahead. The rest of you can come up when you're ready. Uh—the Chief will be wantin' to talk to this drifter a spell, first."

"Sure you can handle him alone?' '

"I said we're leavin' now!" gritted Beecher, and lifted into leather.

Morgan had already mounted the roan. "Good work, Beecher!" he chuckled. "You passed the first exam. Now, start ridin', and not in too big a hurry. Keep between me and that crowd yonder."

The big man swore at his bronc, kicked him forward. They jingled across the dusty yard, Morgan with a constant sideward glance on his prisoner and, past him, at the hardcase crew at the corral. Their curiosity seemed to have been satisfied. There were no more questions, their attention being taken with the handling and saddling of their horses.

Then all of a sudden, a wild yell broke across other noises. At the cook shack the Chinese potwrangler was leaping up and down in the dust and waving his arms, shouting something.

"Injun! Injun lun away! Lookee! Scalp people!"

JERKING about, Wayne Morgan saw that the Oriental had spotted Blue Hawk in the act of crossing a cleared space between the house and the big hay barn. It was an unlucky break.

Instantly, a rifle cracked as one of the crew got hands on a weapon and laid a hasty shot at the interloper, seconds before Blue Hawk weaved and vanished behind a jutting corner of the barn.

At the same instant, seeing Morgan's attention held for a second, Jed Beecher tried for a break. Hauling on the reins, he yelled at his men:

"Hey! Kill this drifter! He's got a gun, and he's loose!"

Morgan was pulling a weapon as he whipped around in saddle. The Horseshoe men, fast-thinking gunhandlers, every one of them, had quickly caught the import of their boss's shout and were digging up guns, trying to target the stranger. Morgan thumbed off a shot, drove a man stumbling back to crumple against a corral post. He saw another, down on one knee and deliberately leveling a rifle for a careful bead. A man with a scar on his right cheek.

That, Morgan thought suddenly, must be the leader of the bunch who had stolen Dan Kent's mares and left him, wounded in the Sunstone hills!

He bore down with his smoking six-gun, knowing he could not throw off a bullet before that steady rifle got him dead-center. But just as the rifle muzzle flared Jed Beecher's horse, driven crazy by the racket of firing, took a mad leap forward, that carried it and its rider directly in front of the rifle's sights.

Big Jed Beecher jerked in the saddle at the snapping report. Then his body sagged and he was spilling off the lunging back of the bronc. Morgan saw a bloody smear where his face had been.

Before Beecher's dead body could hit the ground, Morgan had dropped the

hammer and put a slug into that scar-faced killer whose shot had gone awry. The man toppled, his rifle falling from lifeless hands. Morgan straightened the roan out and headed for the protection of the barn.

Blue Hawk was waiting for him at the barn corner, pumping shot after shot that scattered the Horseshoe outfit and dropped one of them. As Morgan pounded up, reaching out a hand, Hawk seized it and came bounding lightly behind the saddle. The barn gave them brief cover as the roan drummed across a flat and then took the rise behind the ranch buildings.

"To the left, Senor!" Hawk called above the drum of hoofs.

Morgan had already spotted the pinto and was bearing that way. Blue Hawk jumped down, snatched up the leathers of his ground-hitched pony, vaulted lightly into the saddle. The roan did not even break stride in the switchover. Now the pinto was coming hard on its heels, and the crest of the rise lifted and dropped behind the fugitives, and Horseshoe Ranch was lost to sight behind them.

Pursuit would be quick—just as soon as the Horseshoe crew could tighten cinches and throw themselves into leather. The thought spurred Blue Hawk and Morgan, drove them northward toward the Sunstone breaks as fast as they could make their horses cover the uneven ground.

As they rode, with a constant eye on the backtrail, Morgan carried six-gun ready in his right hand. Hawk kept his rifle in the open, strong, brown hand gripping it at the balance. Even from the saddle of a running bronc, the Yaqui could make an expert, one-handed snap shot with a long gun.

The ground was already breaking around them in eroded gullies and rocky draws. Shoe iron rang on bare patches of outcrop stone that would scarcely take a print. But the outlaw crew was pressing them hard, a mass of riders pouring darkly across the tilted land, guns ready for the men who had caused the death of Jed Beecher and three others of their number.

Though lost to sight now in the rise and fall of the broken land, the steady drumming of their horses came clearly across the late afternoon air when the fugitives pulled up momentarily to listen.

"Take the lead, Hawk!" Wayne Morgan ordered quickly. "There's too many of them to shoot it out with. You're the man with the savvy to shake that pack off our tails!"

CHAPTER X

An Outlaw Talks

MAKING no comment, the Yaqui accepted the chore, pushing his pinto ahead of Morgan's roan. "This way, Senor!" he grunted, sweeping an arm toward a stony ravine that slanted up between two barren hills to their left.

They went into this at a lunging climb, crossed quickly over the head of the draw. Here, pulling sharply to the right, Blue Hawk led the way along a steep slope just under the crest of the curtaining ridge. Where another ridge abutted on this one, they swung out and ran along its knife edge, threading their way among a thin

[*Turn page*]

Fast HELP for HEADACHE
UPSET STOMACH
JUMPY NERVES
BROMO-SELTZER
FIGHTS HEADACHE THREE WAYS
For fast help from ordinary headache always take Bromo-Seltzer. It fights headache three ways:
1. Relieves Pain of Headache.
2. Relieves Discomfort of Upset Stomach.
3. Quiets Jumpy Nerves.
Caution: Use only as directed. Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drug store fountain or counter today. A product of Emerson Drug Company since 1887.
BROMO SELTZER

stand of twisted juniper, until the ridge tilted downward.

They took this drop, horses sliding on braced haunches, dust billowing and small stones building a miniature landslide.

Below, a trickle of water ran burbling over a stony channel; willows clung to the shallow banks. Blue Hawk put his bronc into the stream and turned up it along the gravel-strewn bottom. The water, breaking and splashing under the hoofs of the broncs, reflected the first colors of sunset that were beginning to stain the high sky overhead. After a couple hundred yards, Hawk left the water and Morgan followed him over a hump and into a brush-choked trough beyond.

So they traveled, pushing their mounts, with the canny Indian choosing every opportunity the unfamiliar terrain gave of burying their trail, while Wayne Morgan kept wary watch on the backtrail. Finally, Morgan was so sure they had thrown off their enemies that he slid his six-gun back into its pouch on his right hip. He called ahead to Blue Hawk for a short halt in order to rest their blowing horses and make a careful test for sounds of pursuit.

They reined in on a gentle slope, just within the fringe of a cottonwood motte cresting a hilltop above a dry ravine. Utter silence lay upon them here, broken only by the breathing of their horses, the creak of saddle leather, the rustle of trees in the breeze that brushed the hillside.

No torrent of pursuing hoofs. Wayne Morgan was about to make satisfied comment when, with an upflung palm, Blue Hawk gave warning. Then Morgan, too, heard the sound that had reached the Yaqui's sharp hearing.

Moments later, then, a single rider came into sight, pushing at a lope along the ravine, following hard on their course. It was a Horseshoe man, and he was keeping a constant watch around him, his head swiveling from side to side. Directly below the two watchers he reined in, ran an intent stare circling along the sides of the ravine, obviously hunting for sign.

"We lost 'em all but one, it looks like!" Morgan grunted under his breath. "But maybe it's a lucky break for us that one of the outfit had brains enough to follow our trail."

"How do you mean, Senor?" asked Hawk in a puzzled whisper. "What do you intend to do?"

"We lost Jed Beecher," the other explained, as he swung quickly down and worked at the lashings of his saddle roll. "But here's a chance to grab another prisoner to replace him. We ought to have some fun with this fellow, Hawk. You wait here until I call you, and follow my lead."

From the bed-roll he had shaken out a black cape, black Stetson, mask and gloves. It was the work of seconds to slip these on above his other clothing, to change himself from the range drifter, Wayne Morgan, to the sinister figure of the Masked Rider.

"It would have been just too bad," he observed, "if that Horseshoe crowd had thought to look through my soogan, while they had me down there, and found these duds!" He passed the reins of the roan up to Blue Hawk, saying, "Keep him out of sight."

And then he was moving off through the fringe of trees, on foot, clearing his six-guns as he slowed at the edge of the timber.

The lone rider in the ravine seemed puzzled. Ahead of him the cut ended abruptly against a steep wall, over which the fugitives could have taken flight only with the help of wings. Apparently, in that shale like soil, he had missed any sign the two horses had made when they left the ravine and cut upslope into the trees.

As he sat saddle, puzzling out the thing, he was fumbling for cigarette materials and had a smoke almost made, when the Masked Rider's sharp warning sent it spilling from his fingers.

"No mistakes! You're covered, so keep clean away from a gun!"

WITH a convulsive jerk, the rider twisted about in his saddle. For a moment he couldn't find the speaker, and then he spotted the black-robed figure standing amid thickening shadows at the foot of the cottonwoods. His stare froze. A sound broke from him, and a warped look of surprise and awe shaped his gaping features.

"All right," snapped the Masked Rider, in a deep voice that sounded quite unlike Wayne Morgan's easy drawl. "Unbuckle your gun and toss it down!" And as the man hastened to obey the menace of the

Colts that filled the robed man's gloved hands: "You were after Wayne Morgan, I take it. He's a friend of mine, and I reckon I'll just hold you here till he's had time to get clean away. Maybeso there's some questions you can answer while we're waiting. Get off that bronc!"

He walked forward, pouching his guns, as the prisoner slid to the ground. The Horseshoe man had recovered from his first shock of surprise and he wore a sullen scowl as he faced the steely eyes behind the mask.

"I dunno nothin'," he muttered, "and I'm tellin' nothin'."

"A gent with savvy enough to follow the trail Blue Hawk left must know plenty!" the Masked Rider said sharply. "Three questions, mister!" He numbered them on gloved fingers, his stare boring hard into the other. "First, where have they taken Val Norris? Second, how do I get into the Sunstones hideout? Third, who is *the Chief*!"

The prisoner's jaw hardened. "I ain't talkin'!" he growled.

For a long moment, the Masked Rider considered him. The man had not only intelligence, but nerve—a combination of talents that seemed sadly wasted in a career of outlawry. But even the bravest man could break if the right kind of pressure was put upon him, and the Masked Rider meant to waste as little time as possible getting the information he wanted.

"All right, Blue Hawk!" he called back into the timber. "I need you down here!"

The Yaqui came padding softly down out of the trees, leading his horse.

Watching their prisoner closely, the robed man said in his deep voice, "This gent says he doesn't want to talk to us. I figure it's important that he does. Maybe you can persuade him?"

Blue Hawk got his meaning and quickly entered into the game. "I think maybe, Senor," he agreed softly.

As he moved forward, his right hand dipped toward a leather sheath at his waist and came up flashing a dangerous-looking knife. Hawk looked deep into the prisoner's staring eyes. Face expressionless, he lifted the knife and eyed the glint of the blade.

"Yes, Senor," he murmured. "The man will talk. Make him take off his boots."

"No!" cried the outlaw, falling back, his face gone ashen and sweat starting to shine on his forehead. "No, Masked Rider! You—you're a white man, ain't you? You wouldn't turn me over to this red snake and let him work his dang savage torture on me?"

"I will need a small fire, Senor," Hawk went on smoothly. "To heat the blade."

"Don't—don't!" All at once, his nerve snapping, the outlaw was pawing at the black-robed rider, begging and half-sobbing in his fear. "I'll talk! I'll tell you anything you want me to. But—keep that red-skinned devil away from me!"

Except that there was something grim in the collapse of valor in this man, the Masked Rider might have had difficulty to keep from smiling at the effect of Blue Hawk's ferocious pretending.

"Better go ahead and build that fire, anyway, Hawk," he said. "If I don't like his answers, I'll turn him over to you. . . All right, hombre, you heard the questions: Where did they take the Norris girl?"

"The Sunstones hideout." The prisoner was all too anxious to talk now.

"And how do I get there? It's somewhere off that canyon where they downed the Kent boy last night, isn't it?"

"That's right ! A mile further, on the left as you move westward through the canyon, there's a side ravine that leads into a grassy basin. You can tell it easy because the mouth of the ravine is marked by a streak of red in the rocks. You can't miss it."

"Any other way in?"

"No."

THE MASKED RIDER considered this information, and it sounded authentic to him. His prisoner, he thought, was too terrified to attempt a lie. The robed man nodded and put the final question:

"All right, last of all—who is the Chief?"

But this time he drew a blank.

"I don't know!" cried the outlaw. "I've never seen him, myself—I'm new to the outfit. There ain't more'n a half dozen that do know. Jed Beecher acted as go-between."

The Masked Rider turned to Blue Hawk. "What do you think? Is he lying?"

"No, I swear it!" The prisoner's voice rose to a yelp of frenzy. "I can't tell what

I don't know, can I?"

The Masked Rider shrugged under the folds of the flowing cape. "All right," he grunted. "I reckon we'll have to take your word for the time being." He jerked his head at Blue Hawk. "Tie him up, Hawk. Put him on his bronc and take him along with you to our camp, for safe-keeping."

"And you, Senor?"

"I've got to have a look for that hideout entrance while there's still light left to find it. Afterwards, we'll decide what to do next. With Jed Beecher killed and the girl to be got rid of, and the Chief due at the hideout sometime this evening, things are bound to come to a head there *pronto*. And when they do, we got to be in on it!"

Once more astride the roan, and with his Masked Rider outfit stowed away in the bed-roll, Wayne Morgan headed north through the glow of sunset and into the glittering region of the Sunstones. And as he rode, he was busy working on some new and interesting information Blue Hawk had passed on to him.

Hawk had told of seeing Monk Swale and the banker, Ira Logan, in conference at Grass Valley, and of seeing money pass between them, hearing meaningful fragments of their talk. So now there was definite proof of a connection between the banker and the owlhoot organization.

He remembered the open hostility with which Hod Jenkins and Doc Harriman and Will Emmett had greeted such a suggestion. Plainly, Logan had his neighbors fooled, blinded by his power and his cloak of respectability. But in Wayne Morgan a feeling was growing stronger that the money man would not only prove to be deeply involved in outlawry, but might even turn out to be the mysterious Chief himself—the cunning intelligence that coordinated and directed the workings of the organization over a territory comprising two sprawling Western states.

So his thoughts were running as he headed again into the canyon where, twenty-four hours ago, Dan Kent had ridden into ambush, and where the trail of the forty stolen horses had vanished into thin air.

Here, the shadows of night were already drawing in, and a cool breath of darkness soughed between the high, split walls of living rock. But with a little searching, Wayne Morgan quickly located the strata of red rock which the outlaw had mentioned, marking the opening of one of those numerous side cuts which broke the canyon's course.

After a moment's debate he turned into this, moving more cautiously now, with one hand ever near the butt of thonged-down Colt. There would be a guard, undoubtedly. But he wanted to penetrate a little way into the ravine, make a quick survey of the lay of the land.

This was a narrower way, scarcely more than a crack in the towering rocks, yet he thought it would be wide enough to drive stock through without too great difficulty. At one point where the hoofs of the roan struck softer flooring, Morgan swung down from saddle and risked the light of a match, which he held close to the earth and carefully shielded by the crown of his Stetson.

He grunted in approval at what he found: tracks, both old and fresh.

Much travel had gone through this hidden canyon, and the newest sign indicated the passage of a considerable body of riders only hours ahead of him. So much the single match told him, in the few minutes before it curled to a blackened twist and died.

Straightening, Morgan brought out another match, and by its light gave a hasty scrutiny of the steep and encompassing walls. He shook out the light, nodding in satisfaction. There were marks along those walls at about the level of a steer's bobbing head—marks scratched there by the horns of countless stolen cattle being crowded through the slot.

CHAPTER XI

Desperate Plan

RETURNING to the roan, Morgan stood a moment with hand on saddle, piecing all this together in his mind. The picture was rounding out, now, the details falling into a pattern. He thought he knew how the system operated.

The basin hideout to which this rock-walled ravine served as entrance was a well-organized clearing house for loot and stolen stock. The men who took Dan

Kent's Morgan horses, for example, had brought them here to exchange for contraband which entered the Sunstones from beyond the State line. Relieved of their dangerous loot, the thieves would be free to return for other jobs, perhaps carrying with them the money from a bank robbery committed in the neighboring state, or other such contraband which they could safely dispose of. Stolen cattle, of course, were probably disposed of through the Horseshoe Ranch.

The whole thing was beautifully coordinated, the product of a warped and coldly logical intelligence. And it was that cunning brain which the Masked Rider must unmask and expose, in order to destroy the workings of its organization. And to save the girl, Val Norris, from some unknown but dreadful fate.

Striking of a horse's iron shoe on rock made his head jerk up sharply. Someone had entered the slot behind him!

He glanced about him quickly. Darkness was almost complete now, within the narrow ravine. But ahead and to the right lay a large boulder, which had dropped at some time past from the rim of the wall above, so that it partially blocked the passage and traffic must swing out to avoid it.

Quickly, Morgan led the roan forward and around this, drawing back into the angle between boulder and wall. There he waited as the approaching sounds came louder and clearer in the night.

There were several horses, coming at a slow and plodding gait—which puzzled him until he heard distinctly the tinkle of a bell. Then Morgan understood. It was a pack train moving toward him through the narrow canyon, and animals no doubt laden heavily with stolen goods and being pushed through into the hideout at an easy pace.

As they came upon him, the man in the shadow of the boulder caught at the roan's muzzle, a hand ready to shut off a telltale snort or whinny.

The pack train was abreast of him now, moving past within a few feet of where he stood pressed against the rock but almost invisible in the deepening dark. Scarcely breathing, he listened to every noise as the shapeless figures went by, so close that he could have reached out and touched them in passing.

He heard a snatch of talk. A man's voice swore gruffly, and muttered: "Git along there, you mules! We're almost in!"

THE tinkle of the lead animal's bell began to fade again as the long line of pack animals shuffled through. There would be guards at the head of the train to set the trail, others at the rear to push the lagging mules. Wayne Morgan saw opportunity then, and without hesitation he took it.

With a smooth and silent motion he swung up to the roan's back, eased him out of the hiding place, to fall in beside the shuffling line of pack animals. Because of the dark, he felt sure none of the men at either the head or the tail of the train knew that a newcomer had joined them.

He matched his pace to the slow plodding of the mules. This was a risky impulse, but if it worked it would get him into the hideout and past the guard which, he felt certain, the outlaws would have stationed at the mouth of the slot.

Ahead now, past a slight twist in the trail, the pack train had been halted, and Morgan pulled in, listening. The breeze was fresh and strong against his face; he knew that the end of the knife-slot crevice and the entrance to the basin hideout lay immediately ahead. Sure enough, on the night breeze voices came clearly back to him:

"What did the old hen die of?"

"Choked on a nugget of raw gold!"

"What was the assay?"

And the answer: "Two dozen eggs to the ton!"

The meaningless interchange was obviously a challenge and countersign. Now the lead mare's bell tinkled into life again and the pack mules started doggedly forward. As Wayne Morgan nudged his roan into step with them, he knew the moment of danger was upon him.

He took the twist in the slot and gray light showed ahead, notched by the high walls. The guard must be somewhere above him, in the rocks. There was still a remnant of daylight in the basin hideout, enough that the lookout could see him as he passed below.

Would there be further challenge, another foolish riddle to which he would be supposed to know the answer? Or would the guard let him by, accepting him with-

out question as one of the pack-train escorts?

One hand near gun butt, head ducked so that the Stetson shaded his face, Morgan rode into the notch. The eyes of the guard above him were almost like a physical weight as he came into the last gleam of day. But the challenge for which he held himself tensed and waiting failed to come.

Then he had passed and the basin hideout of his enemies lay before him, filling rapidly with the darkness of the night.

A PATCH of scrub pinon grew close beside the entrance and Morgan lost no time in drawing aside into its protection, before the rear guard might come through the notch and notice the intruder.

Shadows were deepening fast. There was no hint of detection as the last of the mules and riders wound by him, the basin grass muffling their hoofbeats and the bell of the little lead animal dwindling into a thin, clear tinkling.

He stayed where he was, in cover, until the last light had faded out and darkness was thick and still in the big, rockbound cup. In that time, he was able to make a thorough inspection of the basin and get its proportions and landmarks well settled in his mind.

The cup was not large, but it was well hidden and it held water and several acres of rich grass bottom. There was a good-sized band of cattle grazing, a couple of men riding easy circle on them as they settled for the night. He saw, also, the dark, moving blots that were horses, running together at the far end of the basin. He saw manes tossing, hoofs lifted high, and heard the clear neighing of a mare come across the stillness.

Dan Kent's Morgans!

At the center of the cup, near a spring that sparkled from beneath the rimming wall, there was a camp of sorts—a few brush lean-tos, stacks of supplies. A fire glowed there, its flame taking over as daylight thinned from the air. Voices of men drifted over, and dark figures crossed and recrossed before the bright glow.

The pack train came in, was greeted noisily. The mules were unpacked, the saddle horses stripped and turned loose on the grass.

Searching for something among the other moving shapes there, Morgan thought he found what he was looking for—one who sat apart, motionless, as though with bound limbs. Elation touched him, for he knew this was Val Norris! But an uncertain number of gun-hung men stood between him and the girl, and the odds were terrifically large.

With the coming of full dark, Morgan stepped again into saddle and moved out of the pinon thicket, starting in a wide, slow circle, keeping to the edge of the cup and close to the rimming wall. A good portion of an hour had passed since his entry into the basin, and he still had no sure plan of action.

Suddenly he drew rein at the sound of another horse stepping cautiously in the brush somewhere very near at hand.

A gun slipped into his fingers, leveling across the saddle-horn as he keened the blackness ahead. He would not be taken by surprise by whoever this was stalking him in the night. But a shot would raise a general alarm and that could prove disastrous, here in the outlaw stronghold with the girl a prisoner and the only entrance to the basin blocked.

Morgan saw the horseman, then, a darker blot against the blackness. His hand tightened on the butt of the Colt, the hammer rising under the pressure of finger on trigger. A voice whispered sibilantly:

"Senor!"

Breath escaped him with a grunt as he lowered the gun. Blue Hawk. He kneed the roan forward, and the Yaqui was beside him.

"How did you get past the lookout?" Wayne Morgan exclaimed.

"I didn't, Senor. It seems there is another way in—a dim trail across the rim above us. Unguarded. When you did not return I knew you must have got inside the basin, and I was afraid you'd be needing me. Senor Kent was resting quietly. And then, by accident, I saw a man riding in and I followed him, and without intending to he showed me the secret trail."

"A man?" echoed Wayne Morgan. "But who was it, Blue Hawk?"

"I could not see him well, Senor, not by starlight. He seemed not much used to a saddle, and he came from the direc-

tion of the flatlands. Maybe from the town."

"The Chief, probably!" Morgan exclaimed. "They're all here, now. Including the girl. We got a chance to bust this whole setup with one blow!"

BLUE HAWK sounded dubious. "A big job. There are many men in yonder camp, Senor."

"Yeah, I know," Morgan answered. "But I'm beginning to get an idea. There's only one chance, Blue Hawk, of getting Val Norris out of their hands. And that's the first thing we got to do!"

"We go in, maybe, and throw our guns on all that crowd of gunmen and say, 'Hands up, please'?"

"Hardly as simple as that," Wayne Morgan admitted.

Briefly, then, he outlined his plan. The Yaqui listened in silence; when he spoke, his voice was dark with apprehension:

"It will be very close, Senor. If you cannot reach the girl in time—"

"I'll have to!"

"I brought Midnight, Senor. I thought maybe you would want to become the Masked Rider, since the black costume blends with the darkness and makes a poorer target."

Morgan agreed, with thanks. "You think of everything, Blue Hawk!"

It took only a moment to remove the cape and mask from his saddle-roll, and for the two to change mounts. Midnight was fresh and eager between the knees of his master. The roan had had a rest during the past hour and would serve Blue Hawk well.

"Now," grunted the Masked Rider, settling the robe about his shoulders, "let's ride!"

It took half of another hour to complete their careful circuit of the basin. The moon was just tipping into sight above the cup's high east rim, its radiance filtering into the deep interior. It showed the lurking pair the mass of the stolen mares, glinted on horns of the grazing cattle. Some had already ended their feed and had begun to lie down.

One of the two nighthawks went past the spot where the lurkers hid, grass whispering against the fetlocks of his bronc. He rode on and was gone. The Masked Rider slipped a Colt from leather.

"All right," he whispered. "Now!"

Midnight plunged forward beneath him, powerful legs pistoning into instant speed at the touch of his master's spurless heels. With a shrill yell, the black-robed rider lunged straight at the herd, and his gun bucked in his hand and sent shots crashing against the sky.

To his right, Blue Hawk had made his sally simultaneously. Within seconds, the lowing herd, startled into motion, was on its feet and moving, rolling straight forward toward the camp.

And now came the supreme test of his plan of action. Crouched in saddle, the Masked Rider called to his black stallion, "Get going, Midnight!" And while Blue Hawk continued to push the cattle with yells and gunshots, the Masked Rider gave his whole attention to making speed.

He rounded the rear of the herd that was working itself into a panicked run. Close beside that mass of shuttling feet and lumbering, head-tossing bodies, Midnight lengthened out and the dark ground flashed beneath his hoofs. The herd was in full stampede now, bellowing as it rolled its deadly course straight toward the camp. The Masked Rider knew he had to reach the fire before those many hundred knife-sharp hoofs struck across it.

Suddenly a figure on horseback showed ahead of him—one of the nighthawks. He saw him in the strengthening moonlight. The man was yelling at the cattle, trying futilely to turn them and stem their wild course. Then he caught sight of the black-robed figure bearing down upon him and he swerved to meet this challenge. Moonlight glinted on gun barrel as he swung a six-gun up and fired.

The bullet sang overhead and the Masked Rider shot him in the chest, dumped him from saddle with arms flailing. The riderless bronc bucked and ran away, and Midnight continued without interruption his mad run.

But the masked man saw now that he would not win this dangerous race against the herd. Ahead of him, the campfire was growing larger and clearer. The figures about it were excited puppets, their shadows jerking across the firelight as they scattered, yelling, before the oncoming juggernaut of churning hoofs.

And there, just at the shadowed edge

of the fireglow, he glimpsed the struggling figure of Val Norris, helpless with hands and ankles bound, trying to roll to safety. That glimpse was all he had. For, still fifty feet short of his goal, he saw the front of the herd thunder across the outlaw camp.

CHAPTER XII

Six-gun Bust-up

CONFUSING things that were now happening seemed to Val Norris a nightmare from which she would certainly waken soon. Discovery of her stepfather's perfidy, a sleepless night of imprisonment at Horseshoe, had left her emotionally wrought-up and exhausted.

For awhile, the hope of rescue had been raised by the note she had managed to sneak out to that strange rider who had fought and beaten Jed Beecher outside the shuttered windows of her prison. But this hope died when, later, her stepfather had put her on a bronc and sent two of his men to deliver her to this hidden basin in the Sunstones.

It was the final blow to shocked and fine-strung nerves.

Now, trussed hand and foot on a blanket beside the fire, with the outlaws making noisy talk around her, she had a chance to straighten her jumbled thoughts and realize the gravity of her situation.

Jed Beecher was dead! She had learned this news when excited men from Horseshoe, headed by the foreman, Monk Swale, rode into the hideout. There had been a shooting of some kind at the ranch. And something about an Indian. This lifted a moment of hope within her —remembering last night and the masked stranger, and the Indian companion he had called "Blue Hawk."

But then this hope, too, died. Even they could not find their way into this hidden basin, past the guard.

A pack train came into camp as night settled blacker over the basin. The mules were stripped, the men came to the fire for grub and coffee and joshing talk about trail conditions beyond the Sunstones.

The leader of the train was a big fellow, whom the others called "Tip" Ruden. Val knew that he was an outlaw, like the rest in this hideout. And with her stepfather gone, Val looked to her own future at the hands of these hard-faced men, and the thought sickened her.

Yet, as a full white moon lifted above the high east rim, putting its soft beauty sheening on the rich grass, it was hard to picture this basin as a lawless place. The cattle she could hear lowing and stirring as they settled for the night, however, were stolen stock. And she had seen the horses she knew belonged to Dan Kent. The nightmare was real enough, and it was not the kind one woke from with pleasant relief.

Suddenly she was conscious of a change in the atmosphere about the fire—a quick tension of excitement that had settled over the score of men grouped there. She looked about her, wondering. She saw a knot of Horseshoe riders, who had been playing poker for cartridges around a spread-out saddle blanket, staring at something beyond the brightness of the fire. Another had paused in the act of leaning for a coffee pot set among the coals.

Val, following their stares, saw the figure of a man in the shadows yonder.

With the fire dancing between, dazzling her eyes, she could not see much. But she heard a muffled exclamation:

"The Chief!"

Tip Ruden, the pack-train leader, was on his feet now and circling the fire to greet the new arrival.

"Hello, Tip," the newcomer said, in a voice which seemed to Val Norris vaguely familiar but to which she could not give identity. "Glad you're here. I've got another job arranged for you and your boys, two days from now in Northville. Got all the plans worked out."

Monk Swale had stepped out from one of the brush lean-tos. He faced the dim figure of his superior across the fireglow.

"I'm afraid that'll have to wait, Chief," Monk said. "Maybe you ain't heard about Jed Beecher gettin' killed. That's gonna kind of change things, I guess."

There was a moment of startled silence as the chief assimilated this news. Then a harsh grunt of laughter exploded from him.

"It changes nothing," he grated. "We've

got the girl, haven't we? She'll own Horseshoe, now. And if she won't work with us, then we can arrange for her to deed the ranch over to you, or to Tip Ruden, or one of the others, and leave the country—disappear. The organization will continue, just as before."

"Kill a woman, Chief?" Monk Swale's tone sounded shocked. "That's dangerous!"

"Not at all! I can cover up—folks will believe anything I tell them. I'll say that, shocked over the death of her stepfather, Miss Norris wanted to get away without seeing anyone, and she left me the job of selling the ranch and a forwarding address for sending the papers to be signed. Not a soul in the valley would doubt my word on that, or anything else."

"What was that?" someone yelled sharply.

VAL NORRIS, horrified by the meaning of this talk, had also heard the sudden burst of firing. Astonished by the sound, every man was staring off into the dark. They caught the rumble of hoofs, the swell of frightened bawling.

"The herd!" a man cried. "It's a stampede!"

All at once the scene about the fire dissolved into a frenzied effort to escape the oncoming tide. But it was already too late. No time to get to horses, and no place in that tiny basin where a man on foot could reach safety.

Val saw the sheen of horns and glistening eyes. She tried to scream but it stuck in her dry, constricted throat. The ground shook beneath knifing hoofs—hoofs that would flatten and trample any living thing. One or two of the outlaws kept their heads enough to pull guns and empty them, trying without success to turn the leaders. And then, in desperate fear, the girl was crawling, inching her way painfully across the ground in spite of the ropes which bound her.

The stampede struck.

Val caught a glimpse of a man going down, arms flailing, as the point of the herd struck him. A pack mule screamed, an almost human sound of agony. The campfire geysered in a fountain of sparks as lunging bodies plunged through.

Directly behind Val there was a splintering crash as a steer went through one of the flimsy brush lean-tos. She saw its lowered head, the shine of its eyes; then its hoofs flashed and it was gone, leaping her prone form and by some miracle missing her. It was a miracle which could not happen twice.

Another frenzied steer came out of the boil of dust, straight toward her this time. Val closed her eyes—and heard a single gunshot, close above her head! The steer dropped in its tracks, stumbling and rolling.

A powerful hand closed upon her arm and she was being lifted bodily to the back of a horse. Cloth brushed her face—the loose folds of a black cape. And, staring, she looked unbelieving into the grim blue eyes that blazed behind the slits of a mask.

From the ground a gun blasted, bullet driving within inches of the black-robed-man's head. The Masked Rider, handicapped by the weight of the girl in his arms, twisted. He sighted Monk Swale with the dust streaking around his spraddle-legged shape, smoking gun ready for another shot.

The face of the Horseshoe foreman, even in that uncertain light, showed its twisted look of hatred. Then the robed man's gun spoke and that face turned into a smear of blood. The Masked Rider was turning Midnight and sending him away from there, away from the site of the campfire which was lost now beneath churning, pounding hoofs.

On a slight knoll he halted and stepped out of saddle, easing the girl to the ground. Quickly he worked at the ropes that bound her.

"You hurt any, Miss Norris?" his deep voice demanded anxiously.

"No. I'm—I'm all right." But she clung to his arm a moment, steadying herself. "It was—awful!"

"It's all over now," he assured her quickly.

The stampeding herd was running itself out, farther down the basin. What had been a campsite was now a grim place of flattened lean-tos, of scattered embers and of huddled shapes that had been men. Those who had escaped the slashing hoofs were scattered and fled.

Calming quickly, the girl poured out her story. She told of the cold-blooded plan the Chief had unfolded for being

rid of her and retaining Horseshoe Ranch under control of the owlhoot organization. The masked man heard her through, grimly.

"The Chief was certainly sure of himself," he grunted. "But after tonight—"

He whirled, gun leaping to the ready. Two riders were coming through the deep grass—riders who could be part of the broken-up gang, bringing danger with them.

When they were near enough for recognition, the Masked Rider lowered his weapon.

"Blue Hawk," he said. Added, in surprise, "And *Dan Kent!*

BY MOONLIGHT, the Masked Rider saw the twisted grin on Kent's face. The youngster reeled a little uncertainly in the saddle.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded sharply, as the horse rancher pulled rein beside the Yaqui.

"I disobeyed orders," Kent answered, voice a bit weak. "I figured I could sit saddle, so I got a kak on one of your broncs and followed Blue Hawk. I couldn't sit there and wait, knowing a girl was in danger and you two heading into gunfire to help her." At that moment he caught first sight of Val Norris and relief flooded his voice. "Then you're all right? You aren't—"

He sagged, catching at saddle-horn. Val was at his side at once, trying to hold him in the saddle. But it was the Masked Rider who took him and lifted him carefully to the ground.

"He's a sick man, Senor," Blue Hawk said.

Dan Kent, with the girl kneeling beside him, lifted his head in protest. "No, I'm not! I feel fine, now."

He had one of the girl's hands held tight in his.

"You're game as they come, Dan," the Masked Rider said. "And there's nothing to keep you from gettin' well, *pronto*. We've done a pretty thorough job, I reckon," he went on. "The crooked outfit is busted. We've got the stolen mares and a pack-train load of recovered loot. Only one thing bothers me."

"The Chief?" Blue Hawk suggested quietly.

The masked man nodded.

"Miss Norris, are you sure that you didn't recognize him? You saw him, you told me."

"Not plainly," Val answered. "I couldn't place his voice, though it sounded familiar, somehow."

"Could it have been Ira Logan's voice?"

Val thought carefully for a long moment.

Then she shook her head.

"I just can't tell for certain," she said finally.

The Masked Rider shrugged. "Come daylight, we'll take a look at what's left of the bodies down there by the fire. But if Logan was the Chief, and if the Chief got away from this fiasco, then there'll never be any way to prove anything against him. He'll escape with his share of the proceeds from the Organization, and maybe in time even rebuild it. I'd hate to think of that happening—"

Dan Kent spoke up, suddenly. "I wonder if that was the Chief went past me as I was coming into the basin?"

"What's that?" The Masked Rider turned on him. "Say that again!"

"I had a tough time following Blue Hawk," Kent explained. "That's a hard and dim trail across the rim. Darkness caught me up there and it took a long time to find my way down into the basin. I could hear all the gunfighting going on and me not able to get into it to help.

"Well," he went on, "as I hit the basin, somebody went past me hell for leather. I know he was headed for that trail. He rode like he knew every foot of the way and was in a heck of a hurry."

THE Masked Rider straightened quickly. "That was the Chief himself!" he exclaimed. He turned, quickly found stirrup and came astride of Midnight's powerful back.

"You take care of these two, Blue Hawk!" he ordered crisply. "If I'm going to keep that crooked skunk from makin' his getaway, I got to start riding fast and hard!"

Midnight seemed to know what was needed of him. His master had barely settled into leather when he lunged forward and was away, hoofs drumming solidly in a hard gallop toward the rim and the hidden trail from the Sunstones' hideout.

CHAPTER XIII

Last Settlement

GALLOPING rapidly across the basin floor toward the foot of the rim, there was nothing to oppose the Masked Rider. The stampeded herd had quieted and was milling uneasily with a continued lifting of bawling voices. But of the men who had made this basin their headquarters, there was no sign.

Probably few had survived. Any that were left must have fled the hideout where the Organization had died this night in front of flaming guns and under frenzied hoofs. Certainly there was no sign of them in the stillness of the basin. But only one gave him any concern, now.

The Masked Rider lost valuable time before he located the steep trail. A screen of scraggling timber hid the switchbacks by which it mounted the steep wall; one could ride very close without suspecting its presence. But once put to the climb, Midnight went up it easily, with a steady lift of powerful shoulder muscles. His rider pulled in for an instant at the top to let him rest, and to search out the moonwashed, broken land that spread before him.

From this high rim the Masked Rider could see for miles across the Sunstones. There was no sign of life, no moving thing. The Chief had had a wide start, and the hope of overtaking him was small indeed.

The Masked Rider knew this, but it was not in him to relinquish a trail, however cold. He sent Midnight forward, giving the big black his head, following the deviations of the trail which were plain now beneath the moonlight. The silvered earth blurred beneath the stallion's hoofs as it moved into a steady, ground-consuming lope. Then the ground began to break up and the trail dipped into draws and brushy arroyos as it worked its way through the lower reaches of the Sunstones, pointing toward the flatlands beyond.

He was not sure now that he any longer followed the same course that other rider had taken—until something caught in the branches of a thorny buckbrush clump drew his eye. He reined in quickly, leaning from saddle to reach it.

It was a strip of paper that had snagged on impaling twigs and held there. Even by moonlight he saw that it contained pencil markings, and he delayed long enough to scrape a match to life and examine the writing.

There was not much, a few cryptic words: "Northville," "12 noon July 16." The name of Tip Ruden appeared. Then below this, what was apparently a crude map of a crisscrossing of streets. A square was heavily penciled and marked "Bank." There were a number of crosses and arrows, which seemed to indicate the positions and planned movements of a number of men.

The Masked Rider knew what he held: the carefully worked-out scheme for the holdup of the bank at the near-by town of Northville, with every detail of time and action planned in advance for the use of Tip Ruden and his outlaws. But there was even more than that.

In this simple piece of paper, which had been lost from the pocket of the Chief and which the Masked Rider now carefully folded and stowed away within his own clothing, lay the clue to the identity of the Organization's mysterious master!

"Let's go, Midnight!" he grunted, and triumph was in his deep voice. "The skunk might still get away from us. But at least, now, we know where to look!"

IT WAS late when he came into the sleeping town of Grass Valley. A saloon or two and the big hotel showed lights. The Masked Rider came in through the cover of the trees along the stream.

Through the shifting trunks and hanging willow heads, he saw a low-burning lamp beyond a window and knew he had the building he wanted. He swung down, knowing Midnight would stand, and went forward quickly.

The dark rear of a building rose before him, and quickly he located the door for which he sought. It was unlocked. The panel yielded beneath his hand and quietly he shoved it open. And through another, inner door, he saw his man.

Back turned to the intruder, he was intently occupied at the rolltop desk. The

rack of pigeonholes had been swung back upon cleverly contrived hinges, revealing a hidden recess from which he was hastily taking packets of money and stowing them within a large bag on the deck.

"All right, Emmett!" the Masked Rider said crisply. "This is the showdown!"

Surprise brought the other whipping around, staring in unbelief as the black-caped man moved forward into the newspaper office, gun leveled in one hand. There was a weapon thrust in the band of the editor's trousers. The Masked Rider reached and flipped the coat aside, jerked out the gun and tossed it across the room.

"So this is your share of the Organization loot?" he said, glancing at the bag and its contents. "Quite a haul! No wonder you didn't dare to keep it in the bank!"

Will Emmett did not try to deny the accusation. When he found his tongue it was to demand, hoarsely.

"How—how did you know?"

"Why, from this!" With his free hand, the Masked Rider brought out the thing he had found beside the trail. "This plan for robbing the Northville bank. Really, mister, you should have used something else for scratch paper, instead of a strip of your own galley proof. When you lost it, it was a finger pointing straight to this print shop!

"You're a clever gent, though," he went on, grudging admiration in his deep voice. "Who would have looked in a newspaper office for the head of the Organization! Or in a man so well respected that Val Norris herself thought first of turning to you, when she needed help. Now I know you must have sent word ahead of us when we rode to Horseshoe. Because Doc Harriman was right—Beecher wasn't brainy enough to have handled that situation without word from the Chief!"

Emmett's mouth twitched nervously. "I don't think you can prove anything!"

"No?" The blue eyes behind the mask were icy, and so was the voice than answered: "I might have a look in that steel file cabinet yonder. You're a methodical gent. I got a notion you'd keep complete records of your organization and every job they pulled." He nodded, as he saw the color drain from Emmett's features and panic take over. "So I guessed right on that, too!"

"You masked devil!" Will Emmett's face had grown more tight and ashen at every word. "Who are you?"

The Masked Rider shook his head. "That's a thing I'll never tell you or any other man!" he said. He flourished the gun. "Go ahead, now, and finish loadin' up your loot. Then I'm turnin' the whole works over to someone with authority, to see you get the punishment that's due you!"

Slowly, with a beaten sag in every line of him, Emmett moved to obey. With the Masked Rider's hawkish eye upon him, he fished more bundles of greenbacks and rawhide bags of coin and gold dust from the secret compartment of the desk.

The Masked Rider, watching, was conscious of the silence, of the frog chorus croaking down along the creek.

All at once, without any warning, Emmett grasped the handle of the laden bag and swung it off the desk, striking the masked man's wrist and knocking the gun spinning from his fingers. At the same instant his own right hand came out of the desk compartment, and in it was the glint of a sixshooter he had hidden there. He was throwing himself bodily behind the protection of the bulky piece of furniture as he shot a bullet at his nemesis.

IT WAS not often the Masked Rider was caught off guard, but Emmett's move came with such abruptness that it did the trick. Lead sang past the robed man. He dropped away from it, and he was whipping his lefthand gun from holster as he went to one knee, steadied himself there.

A gun's roar mingled with the echoes of the first shot as Emmett's second bullet, hastily fired, clipped splinters from the corner of the desk. He was hugging it close, not showing any of himself. And though the Masked Rider had a gun now, there was no target for his lead.

He came to his feet, then, and took a quick forward step. He heard the scuff of Emmett's feet as the man crowded deeper behind the protection of the desk, waiting. Lifting his gun, the Masked Rider put it on the thin wooden sheet that framed one side of the upper, rolltop

compartment. He triggered three times.

A neat row of splintered bullet holes leaped to being, one beside the other. And with the third, there came the sound of a groan and the fall of a slumping body.

The Masked Rider quickly stepped around the desk. His third bullet, coursing through that flimsy wooden shield, had found its target.

Will Emmett lay sprawled there and blood flowed from the hole that drilled his cheek bone.

There were sudden shouts, running feet. The Masked Rider stooped, palming his fallen gun just as the front door of the print shop burst open and men showed there. They held up abruptly, staring.

"It's the Masked Rider!" choked out Hod Jenkins, the little saddlemaker. "And he's killed Emmett!"

"Go easy!" the robed man snapped. "This isn't what it looks like, so don't go jumping to conclusions. If you'll dig into those files of Emmett's you'll find plenty of proof he was a skunk who needed killin' ten times over! This money scattered over the floor is loot he stole, through an owlhoot setup he headed up in the Sunstones. He was the craftiest, orneriest snake any decent town ever took to its bosom!"

For a moment there was silence.

"Could be!" Hod Jenkins murmured then. "No country editor ever had that much *honest* lucre hid away in his desk."

"With the records in the file," the masked man went on, "you ought to be able to trace and return this money to its rightful owners, and at the same time clear up an untold number of unsolved crimes. I suggest you put a guard on things until you can notify a United States marshal, or some responsible person, to take over."

"Mr. Logan!" somebody in the gathering crowd shouted. "Here comes Ira Logan now. We'll let him take charge here!"

They parted, making room for the pompous figure of the banker of Grass Valley as he strode in bristling with imperious questions. The Masked Rider's mouth twisted a little, an icy humor glinted in his blue eyes.

"I don't reckon you'll want Mr. Logan handling this," he said dryly. "He's made himself a big-shot hereabouts, with his close-fisted business methods. But I'm afraid the records are gonna show that he's been payin' bribe money all along to Emmett and to his cohort, Jed Beecher, just so he could be sure his own property would be untouched by the outlaws. Your great Ira Logan is nothin' but a blusterin', lily-livered coward!"

LOGAN'S face had gone purple with rage. Guilt was plainly written there, and as the truth came home to these fellow townsmen he had for years bullied and dominated, they turned savagely upon him.

"Wait!" he croaked, seeing the change in them. "Don't! Let me alone!"

He whirled suddenly, slammed into the door jamb, bounced off a cursing townsman and went running in panic, with the angry roar of the crowd lifting after him.

The Masked Rider, his job done, took that particular moment to fade soundlessly back into the shadows, sheathing his guns. He left the print shop by the rear entrance, and was almost into the willows along the dark stream before cries within the newspaper office told him he had been missed.

"Let's go, Midnight!" he grunted.

Coming lightly to saddle, he galloped north toward the Sunstones—a strange, masked figure with black cloak billowing from his shoulders.

In his pocket was the will proving Val Norris' ownership of Horseshoe Ranch. He would leave that with her, and he would see to it that Dan Kent was placed where he could have the medical care he needed—although sight of the girl seemed to work better for him than any medicine.

And this done, he and Blue Hawk could be off once more on their restless, never-ending crusade for the uprooting of evil, and the aiding of the downtrodden and the oppressed.

●

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES, by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CACTUS CRUSADE

By LESLIE ERNENWEIN

The exciting true story of Mossman's Arizona Rangers!

FOUR night-cloaked riders halted their horses on a ridge above the Three C bunkhouse. No light showed in the moonless gloom below them, and one rider said: "Cook ain't up yet." Saddles creaked as men dis-

Mossman's Rangers shot it out, single-handed, with desperate outlaws

mounted. They tightened cinches, shaped cigarettes and discussed the chore which had brought them here.

"Pete said there was upwards of twenty-five head in the horsetrap yesterday evenin'," a man remarked. "Must mean they're startin' roundup today."

For a little time four cigarettes glowed in the darkness. Then, as a pale streamer appeared in the eastern sky and the roundabout mountains took definite shape, saddles creaked again. After that only one cigarette glowed on the ridge. . . .

It was coming daylight when Cooky Joe opened the bunkhouse door and started for his cook shack. The high rims of the Santa Ritas seemed so close a man could reach out and touch them. They were purple dark and smooth sided against dawn's soft light. But Cooky paid no heed to the mountains, nor the ridge behind them. He was gawking wide-eyed at the horsetrap on the flats where three riders were chousing the roundup *remuda* through a gap in the fence.

"Hoss thieves!" Cooky yelled and dashed into the bunkhouse.

Cooky Pays the Price

While sleep-fogged cowboys reared up in their blankets, Cooky grabbed a Winchester and ran out, taking aim at a wild-riding rustler. But he never pulled the trigger. A rifle cracked on the ridge above him and Cooky Joe collapsed in agony . . .

Two hours later, and eighty miles away, a stagecoach driver pulled up his sweat-stained teams at what appeared to be a landslide in Granite Pass. Beside him on the high seat, a shotgun guard muttered apprehensively: "Mebbe it's a trap."

At this same instant a masked man appeared on the brush-tangled bank above the stagecoach. "Hands up!" he yelled.

Instead of obeying that command, the excited guard swiveled around to look at the bandit. Whereupon hidden guns exploded in thunderous unison and the guard's bullet-riddled body tumbled from the stagecoach . . .

That was Arizona Territory at the turn of the century, a land of cactus-studded deserts and rock-ribbed mountains which had become a renegades' roost for the Wild Bunch brigade. Rustlers, horse thieves, train robbers and gunslick drifters of every description flouted the forces of law and order. Sheriff's posses were ambushed and slaughtered in cold blood. Ranch roundup crews were left afoot by horse thieves who brazenly gathered the beef themselves. Bandits looted cowtown banks in broad daylight, blockaded trains and stages with brutal disregard for the lives of passengers. Booty was the motto and death the symbol of these plundering rascals who traced bloody trails across Cattleland.

A Plague of Outlaws

Thus was Arizona Territory brought to its knees by the owlhoot horde. Frantic appeals flooded the governor's office.

"Do something!" the alarmed populace demanded. "Do anything to stop this plague of plundering outlaws!"

It was enough to make a man wish he had never been elected. Even a Republican. Governor Oakes Murphy was at his wits end when Burton C. Mossman suggested formation of a central territorial law enforcement agency — a small group of gunslingers that would use the renegades' own tactics against them. Murphy clutched at the proposition with the frantic eagerness of a man reaching for a life preserver, and insisted that Mossman, also a Republican, head the law and order crusade.

Mossman declined at first, but finally accepted on his own terms. He must have an absolutely free hand, with no political interference, and be given the privilege of naming his successor from the ranks when he was ready to step down. Murphy agreed, and the territorial legislature rushed through a law establishing the Arizona Rangers.

Thus, in the most chaotic circumstances imaginable, a fantastic legend was born —a legend of reckless bravery which has seldom been equalled in American history. For this was no mighty cavalcade

equipped with military paraphernalia. No regimental commanders reviewed prancing cavalry columns on parade; no bugles were blown, no guidons fluttered forked tails in the breeze. No "spit and polish" regulations or Academy tactics. Just twelve tanned men with saddle-bowed legs, a sergeant and a captain. Fourteen spur-jingling, gunhung horsemen riding to the Cactus Crusade!

Captain Mossman established Ranger headquarters at Bisbee, a rough-and-tumble mining town within rifle shot distance of the Mexican border. Here he enlisted his intrepid band of brush-popping badgetoters, as individualistic and unregimented a group as any roundup boss ever commanded. It is significant of the captain's character and of the urgency which motivated him, that the qualifications for enlistment were simple, yet marvelously adequate for the Herculean task involved.

They were:

1. A speaking knowledge of the Spanish language. (This was extremely important in hunting down outlaws along the border where a considerable portion of the populace was of Mexican descent.)
2. Applicant must have been a working cowboy or cattleman for eight years continuously, previous to enlistment. (No greenhorns or unseasoned glory hunters wanted.)
3. He must possess at least one good saddle horse and a pack mule.
4. Must be a good trailer. (Capable of reading sign in country where horse tracks might be extremely difficult to distinguish.)
5. Must be fast and accurate with a gun. (An applicant might pass all other qualifications and flunk out on this one. He might be a trifle short on the first four and still pass if high on Number Five.)

Mossman, who had been range foreman of the famous Hashknife outfit, asked for no more from his men than he could lay claim to himself. Political allegiance was ignored; the past unmolested. Only the present status of the applicant was important. Could he be trusted? Could he cut the mustard in a tight? In other words was he the type of galoot who filled the time-honored term: "A man to ride the river with"? That was the qualification Mossman insisted upon—the priceless ingredient an Arizona Ranger must possess.

Historians have been loud in their praise of Mossman. No greater tribute could be recorded than that given by Earl R. Forrest, who wrote: "Mossman carried the law into the mesquite with a fearlessness seldom equaled in Western history. He won the admiration and respect of all honest men."

But the praise was scarcely more than a whisper in those first tumultuous weeks when the cactus crusaders pitted their inadequate strength against the legions of lawlessness. Spread so thin that they were invariably outnumbered, Mossman's hard-scrabble riders fought singly and in pairs, staging pistol duels in border-town alleys, running fights in mountain meadows; shooting and being shot at; killing and being killed.

Being criticized also!

"They're as brutal as the bandits themselves," the armchair reformers howled. "They kill in cold blood at the slightest provocation."

But they buried their dead, and brought a grudging respect for law enforcement to the backtrails.

Mossman's Sense of Humor

No, it wasn't all praise then, for Mossman. But in addition to his high degree of courage, the first Ranger captain possessed a real sense of humor. When Governor Murphy complained that Mossman was filling his force with Democrats instead of Republicans, Capt. Mossman countered by asserting: "If you think I can go out in those mountains and catch train robbers with a bunch of Sunday school teachers you are very much mistaken."

Then he added with a twinkle in his eye: "As it is now, every time one of my men gets killed he's a Democrat, and there are too many of them in the territory already. So all I have to do is keep appointing Democrats and there soon won't be any of them left to worry Republicans."

Afterward Mossman admitted that he had no idea whether his men were Democrats or Republicans, and didn't give a hang. A Ranger's politics didn't improve his shooting; nor did it matter when he

went into a rustler camp, masquerading as a posse-hounded horsethief and remained with the gang until the sign was right for a showdown. This practice paid off in renegade roundups and was potent strategy.

For the Rangers, like most of the outlaws, were ex-cowboys. They talked the same language, wore the same shabby clothes. Unless a Ranger met up with an owlhooter who knew him, or inadvertently exposed his badge, there was nothing to distinguish him from the Wild Bunch. They were tough. He was tough. And so this frontier version of infiltration paid welcome dividends.

After serving for two years, during which a veritable horde of highwaymen, rustlers and horsethieves were six-gunned into eternity or strong-armed into Yuma Prison, Mossman resigned and was replaced as captain by Tom C. Ryning. Ryning, recognizing the tragic need for more men and demanding them, succeeded in securing additional riders that increased the force to 31, including a lieutenant and four sergeants.

During Ryning's regime as captain the Rangers' headquarters were in a long adobe building at Douglas on the Mexican border. According to old-timers who served under him, Ryning was a rough-and-ready commander who paced the floor with a big black cigar clenched in his teeth while he planned campaigns to obliterate outlaw gangs enmasse.

Indicative of Ryning's free-lance technique, and of the times, is this story still being told about him at roundup campfires in the brush country:

Several Rangers were in the long headquarters room ready to take off on an assignment soon as Captain Ryning gave the word. He was tramping the floor, considering some detail that pestered him, when in walked a salty looking cowpuncher who claimed he wanted to enlist.

"What's your name?" the captain asked, eyeing him in the fashion of a brand inspector trying to tally one of those curly-cue bugbrands from Sonora.

"Johnny Brooks, from down El Paso way," the stranger said, "and I'd sure be pleasured to sign on with you."

Captain Ryning continued his squint-eyed appraisal, asking: "Where were you along about Eighteen-Ninety?"

"Well," Brooks said, "I was smugglin' cattle on the Texas side and sellin' 'em in Mexico. Then I'd ride along the line fifty mile or so and run some Mex cattle across and sell 'em on the Texas side."

Captain Ryning chuckled. "Thought I recognized you, Johnny," he declared. "I was doing the same thing at the same time."

Old-timers recollect that under Captain Ryning the Rangers added to their small pay by selling to the Mexican *Rurales* the weapons taken from outlaws. That, of course, is cowcamp gossip, as is the report that the *Rurales* resold the confiscated arms to the owlhoot fraternity, thus completing the cycle.

A Famous Gunfighter

Harry Wheeler, third and last captain of Arizona Rangers, was probably the most famous gunman on the force. Many of the Ranger records were destroyed during a flash flood and there seems to be no method of compiling exact figures on accomplishments, but it is a matter of common knowledge that Captain Wheeler could trip a trigger with the best of them.

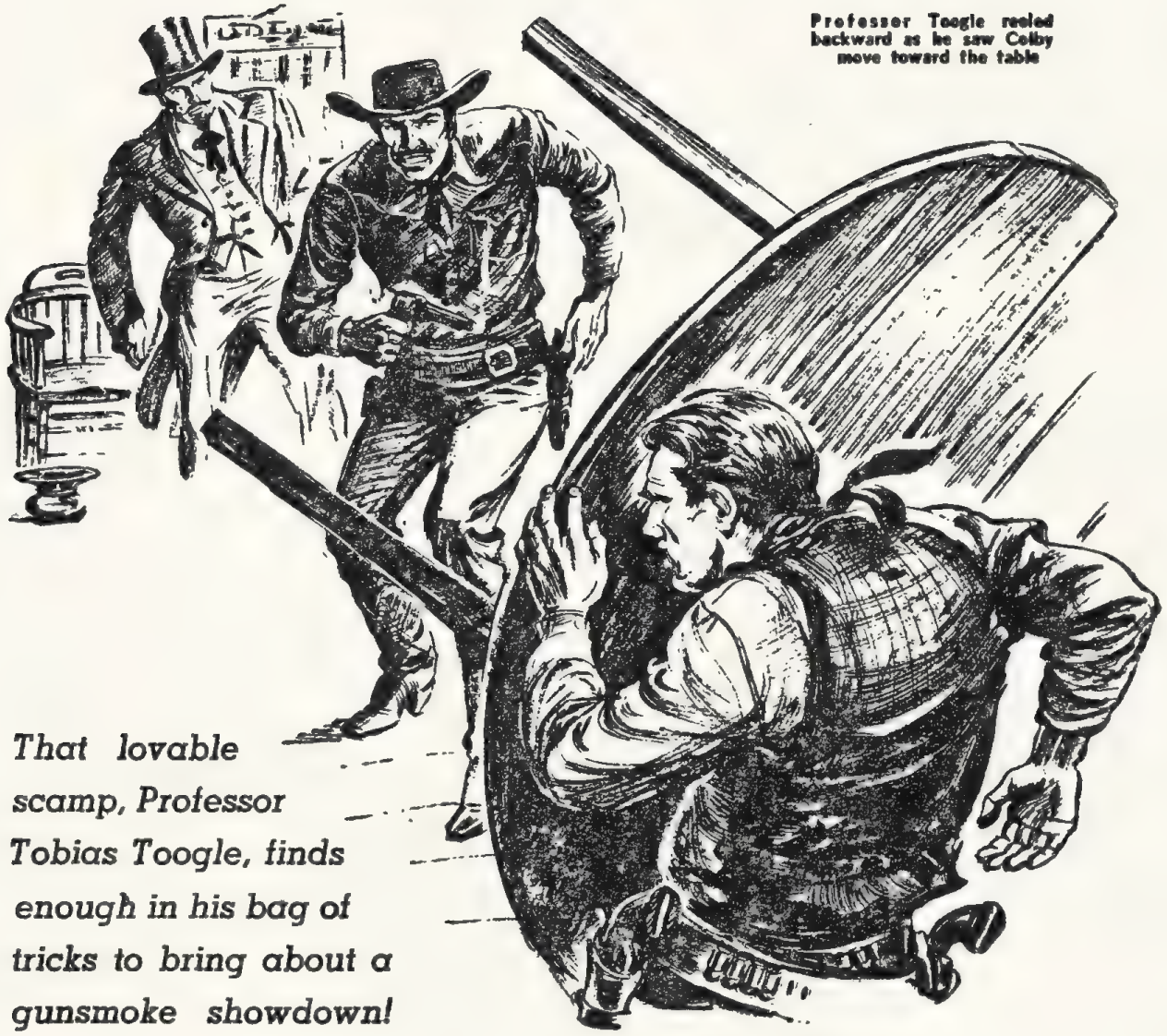
"He was the best man with a six-shooter I ever saw," is how Joe Pearce, who rode with Wheeler, describes him.

While at Tucson in 1905 Wheeler was informed that a saloon was being held up. Rushing into the place he ordered the bandit to surrender. The holdup artist, who chose to shoot it out, lived just long enough to fire one shot which missed its target by a feather-fine margin. Wheeler also fired one shot. But he didn't miss.

During the eight years of their existance, the Arizona Rangers corraled over 400 of the most desperate outlaws in the Southwest. Of the 93 men who rode the backtrails of Arizona Territory with their badges in their pockets, only a handful survive—saddle-warped, silver-haired oldsters whose eyes have been faded by the long march of the years. But a brightness comes into those faded eyes when old Rangers recall the hell-for-leather days under Mossman, Ryning and Wheeler.

"We had us a time," they reflect. "A right lively time."

Which is what it took to win the Cactus Crusade.



Professor Toogle reeled backward as he saw Colby move toward the table

That lovable scamp, Professor Tobias Toogle, finds enough in his bag of tricks to bring about a gunsmoke showdown!

Padlock Pilgrimage

By ED LA VANWAY

A LENGTH of padlocked chain barred "Professor" Tobias A. Toogle's entry into the Lake General Store. He removed his stovepipe hat. He stepped to a window. He pressed his tall forehead to a pane and shielded his vision from the glare of the sunlight that fitted snugly along Skull Point's main street. Professor Toogle's keen survey of the darkened store interior gleaned many facts.

Old Sam Lake and his daughter Molly had several thousand dollars worth of merchandise. It was displayed in neat and orderly fashion. It was, also, Professor Toogle knew, all paid for. The orderliness of it informed the professor that Molly Lake was an excellent housekeeper. An account register told him that old Sam did a credit business. Clips fat with sales tickets told him that Molly's father was lax with collections. Old Sam, therefore, was a kind-hearted man. He was doing

only what he was being forced to do.

Professor Toogle's lips tightened. Determination sharpened his keen brown eyes. Old Sam and Molly should be in there now, waiting on customers.

The rough tread of a big-bodied man coming along the boardwalk put the professor's hat back on and turned him away from the window.

"Come dark, I reckon yuh figger on breakin' in!"

Marshal Vorton Kowe's voice was as rough and authoritative as his stride. Blond, paunchy and jowled, he ransacked Professor Toogle with a hostile gaze. Instantly Toogle marked Marshal Kowe as fat-witted and unimaginative. Took him too long to grasp what he saw.

The marshal saw nothing formidable—only a man with a glossy black goatee who stood five-feet-three in runover cowboots. Ramrod straight, Toogle was clad in a swallowtail coat and the stovepipe hat. Marshal Kowe didn't observe that both coat and hat were ancient. A haberdasher would have deemed them their designers' original models.

"By nightfall, sir," Professor Toogle said quietly, "I hope to enter legally."

MARSHAL KOWE sneered.

"By nightfall yuh're liable to be in Boot Hill, too."

Professor Toogle lifted his brows. "My sole purpose in your town is to open a place of business." He cast a glance at other locked and deserted business establishments and added with a significance lost on the beefy marshal, "Perhaps several."

"Huh?" Marshal Kowe's coarse face hardened.

This called for a decision. Single-handedly the marshal couldn't make it. He shifted his unwieldy carcass uncertainly. He glanced hopefully at the Starr Saloon. Straightway he brightened.

"Hey, Starr!" he bawled at the man who had emerged from the saloon. "Here's a gent aimin' to butt in on us!"

Even if Professor Toogle hadn't known, the fancy pearl-buttoned maroon shirt, silver-mounted six-shooters in embossed pokes, and the flat-crowned black hat would have told him that this swarthy, mustached, snake-slim man was the self-styled boss of Skull Point, Texas.

STARR COLBY sauntered across the street, picking his teeth with a gold-mounted quill. He eased upon the boardwalk, giving Professor Toogle only a cursory glance.

Marshal Kowe slanted a stubby finger at the professor's prominent nose. "He aims tuh go into business!"

Starr Colby removed the toothpick and spat. "No objections to that, perviding he gets in line." His tone sharpened. He looked directly at Toogle. His glittery eyes made the professor shiver. "Folks hereabouts travel single file, feller—like Injuns."

"Or skunks," Professor Toogle suggested politely, versed in the lore of both kinds.

Marshal Kowe was looking at Toogle with obvious suspicion. "Mebbe he's the Ranger that El Paso lawyer threatened to send in here!"

"He's just a runt," Starr Colby pointed out.

Professor Toogle paled. His goatee fairly trembled with righteous indignation.

"A runt, sir," he blazed, "is the weakest member of a litter! As an only child, I question the aptness of your epithet!"

"Keep yore shirt on," Starr Colby said, sneering.

Marshal Kowe slanted the finger towards the professor's nose again. "If yuh buy Sam Lake's store here, yuh blasted well better take out a city license before yuh open up for business! Don't you dast make one cussed sale! Savvy?" He slapped a gunbutt persuasively. "Yuh'll git the same as the others got!"

Professor Toogle was duly impressed.

"Where," he asked politely, "shall I find the city clerk, provided I consummate a deal with Samson Lake?"

Starr Colby removed his toothpick. "Me or Vort either one'll give yuh a receipt for yore money. Vort here'll write out the license when he gets around to it. Vort's clerk as well as marshal."

Colby smiled thinly.

"It ain't as bad as it looks. Costs yuh a thousand dollars for a year's license, but yuh got to raise yore prices in line with mine." He waved a hand at a building down the street. "The Starr Mercantile yonder's mine. The Starr Saloon's mine. Shootin' Star, they call me. That's worth

rememberin'. Might save a life. Yores."

The professor nodded dutifully. Colby's malevolence seeped away. It was as though he approved of the diminutive professor and deemed him worthy of becoming a Skull Point merchant. Without further word, Colby turned his back, stepped off the boardwalk and headed for the saloon.

"Hold on a minute, Starr," Marshal Kowe called.

Sauntering to the middle of the street, the pair stopped. Clipped tones informed Professor Toogle they weren't gossiping. There came a sharp invective from Starr Colby. The professor saw the town boss whip out his wallet, thumb through it angrily, and pass some money to Marshal Kowe.

"Blast it, Vort!" Colby rapped out. "Cut out buckin' my games! You know blasted well they're fixed! Why do yuh keep playin' them?"

The money seemed to end the matter, Professor Toogle saw, with the pair idling on to the saloon.

Toogle was already familiar with the stranglehold Colby and Kowe had on this town. According to Professor Toogle's fast friend and benefactor, Ernie Johns, a young El Paso attorney, a recent city election had given Starr Colby control of the Skull Point city council. Colby then had imported Vorton Kowe for the marshal job.

Together the pair had set out to gain control of everything not already run by Colby. Starr Colby's latest act had been to order the city council to levy an extortionate occupational tax on the local merchants. Those who paid were ordered to raise their prices in line with Colby's own business establishments. Those who refused were ordered to close their doors.

It boiled down to a case of becoming a thief and robbing the townsfolk and honest nesters through outrageous prices, or going out of business. Molly Lake and her father had been among those who refused to become thieves. Molly had also refused to marry Attorney Ernie Johns and move to El Paso until her father was re-established in an honest mercantile business.

The brilliant young lawyer had informed Starr Colby and Marshal Kowe that he purposed to bring in a Ranger to clean up the filthy mess. Instead, Ernie Johns had turned to his friend and erstwhile client, Professor Toogle. The professor readily accepted the assignment. He had to. Lawyer Ernie Johns had recently sprung him from the juzgado.

Throwing off his abstraction as the saloon batwings fanned Colby's and Kowe's rumps, Professsor Toogle fingered the letter in the pocket of his swallowtail coat.

He had got off the stage only a few minutes ago. His bags were still at the station. It was now nearly noon. He was hungry. He had this letter to deliver. He could eat, and then hunt up Molly Lake and her father. Or he could deliver the missive and then eat. If he ate first, he would have to pay for it himself. Sadly, however, Professor Toogle knew this was one time when he'd have to pay his own expenses. His debt to Ernie Johns was too great.

PROFESSOR Tobias A. Toogle approached a lanky, range-clad waddy who was indolently holding down a hitch-rail. For the cowboy's consumption, the professor had to re-phrase his first attempt at inquiry. The Mountaineer House, the waddy informed him then, pointing it out, was not only the best place to eat; it was the only one till them other places got their misunderstanding with Shootin' Starr Colby straightened out.

The Mountaineer House was a white-painted frame two-storey with brown window trim. It sat down over the brow of an aspen-covered hill from the main street. Near enough for a nimble-legged fellow to leap to its rooftop, Professor Toogle thought. Nevertheless he directed his steps at what he presumed to be a footpath.

The hotel lobby, he found spacious but deserted. His shrewd gaze settled promptly on a sign over the desk: ROOM AND BOARD STRICTLY IN ADVANCE. In a stilted girlish hand, a signature had been affixed by Miss Prissy Wheatley. Minutely Toogle scrutinized both sign and signature. He tugged gently at his goatee, ominously thoughtful. Presently his lips tightened and his keen brown eyes glinted with humor.

To his razor-sharp, analytical mind,

the sign and signature had disclosed many facts. The word "strictly" in the sign told him that the declaration was mostly bluff. Miss Prissy constantly granted exceptions to the rule. She was mainly endeavoring to strengthen her own resolve. The signature itself told Professor Toogle that the landlady was getting along in years. The "Miss" was written boldly, extremely legibly, and with desperation. Miss Prissy desired that the public eye catch at first glance her status of being unwedded.

She was, too, of considerable stature, Professor Toogle judged. She had tacked the sign much too high for him. Casting aside his abstraction, Professor Toogle rang the bell and glanced about with an air of expectancy. Nobody appeared.

Through the middle door, the professor heard the brisk clatter of tableware, pleasant but unintelligible conversation, other intriguing sounds. Emanating from back there also, delicious odors assailed his indulgent patience. He forced the bell to give a prodigious jangle.

"Coming—coming! Hold your horses a minute, can't you?"

When Miss Prissy appeared, Professor Toogle was not unprepared, but what he saw weakened and shook him inside.

He guessed her height at six feet, her weight as one-ninety, her age at thirty-five, and was much too conservative. She was woman, all right, but had this cow-town Amazon curves, they were hidden. What she displayed, the professor decided, was more angles than a geometry book.

Miss Prissy Wheatley confronted the diminutive professor with a bony face, not entirely devoid of human kindness, and snapping black eyes that were somehow clear and frank. When she had ransacked Professor Toogle from the soles of his runover boots to the top of his uncovered head, she appeared not to like what she saw.

"Well, what are you staring at, runt?" she wanted to know.

Professor Toogle paled. He fairly quivered with resentment. Breasting his stovepipe hat in a sweeping gesture, he bowed low.

"A runt, madam," he said, controlling his voice with an effort, "is the weakest member of a litter. As an only child, I question the aptness of your epithet. I fail to perceive, in the modern world, the advantages of a towering physique. Doubtless in the Stone Age—"

"You want a room?" Miss Prissy broke in, advancing to regard him dubiously across the desk. "Or a stall? Are you man or jackass? I can't tell by your bray."

"A room and lunch," the professor said, laying loud emphasis on the latter.

"We don't fix lunches," Miss Prissy stated. "Dinner's on the table."

"Lunch or dinner, madam—just so I partake of nourishment. I have the Immortal Bard's disregard for nomenclature."

"Sign this," Miss Prissy ordered, turning the register book around and handing him a pen. Rapidly Professor Toogle wrote, then pushed the pen back into its glass of shot.

Miss Prissy turned the register around and read what he had written; "Professor Tobias A. Toogle." Losing color, Miss Prissy gasped. She jerked erect to slant a startled, suspicious look at her diminutive guest. She bent over and looked at Toogle's signature again, just to make sure, then jerked erect and pointed an accusing finger.

"You—you—that isn't your signature. That's—" Her mouth popped shut. Under rising anger, she reddened.

Professor Toogle drummed on the desk with impatient fingers, secretly proud of his reasonable facsimile of the landlady's own penmanship.

Stepping back a pace, he tossed a gold piece ringingly to the desk top. "Kindly mark subsistence and quarters paid in full for one week, madam."

Miss Prissy took another look at the register, shook her head perplexedly, and reached for the gold piece.

IT was gone!

She shot Professor Toogle an angry look. He took another step backwards, tugged gently at his goatee, and cast a furtive look for an avenue of retreat.

"Where is that money?" Miss Prissy demanded in taut and measured tones.

Professor Toogle gingerly approached her, seemingly picked the gold piece off the desk, and proffered it between extended thumb and forefinger. Miss Prissy reached for it. Again it vanished into thin air.

"Ah-h-h-h" she breathed prodigious face relaxing. "You can't fool me! You're one of those sly of hand fellows!"

Toogle bowed and confessed. On amiable terms with the landlady presently, he asked where he might find Samson Lake and his daughter Molly. Miss Prissy sobered, regarding him narrowly.

"Are you friendly or unfriendly?" she demanded.

"Need you ask, madam?" In swift words the professor identified himself, revealed the nature of his mission in Skull Point, and added that Lawyer Ernie Johns had already informed him as to where Miss Prissy's sympathies lay. When he had finished, Miss Prissy handed him a key, assigning him to his room, and regarded him worriedly.

"Sam and Molly's rooms are down the hall from yours," she said. "Molly's in the dining room now. She's waiting tables for me until they decide what they're going to do. I don't know where Sam is. He went out just before dinner. I just don't know what's come over Sam. Used to, he stood up for his rights. Now he's nothing but a yes-man for Starr Colby It was Molly that made him shut up the store. Hope you can't settle it with Colby and Kowe without killing them, Professor."

Professor Toogle nodded sympathetically. Most of the diners had left the tables when the professor had gone to his room to divert himself of travel stains.

Slender, dark-haired Molly Lake laid a plate for him, bringing hot coffee and food. She waited upon him with smiling lips, but hopelessness and anxiety haunted her hazel eyes.

Professor Toogle said nothing until they were alone; then he handed her the letter. "That's from Ernie," he explained.

"Ernie?" Molly's eyes widened with surprise. Swiftly she unfolded and read the missive.

Molly, dear:

This will introduce Professor Toogle, the man I was telling you about. He can adjust matters satisfactorily if you and your father will take him into your confidence. Believe me, darling, I have utmost faith in the professor. In a way, it's fighting fire with fire, but the end certainly justifies the means. Bearing in mind that this thing cannot be settled by litigation, do whatever you think best.

All my love,
Ernie.

Molly Lake promptly proffered her slim hand. Springing up, the professor saw that they were the same height. Also he observed that this slender girl would make a fitting helpmeet indeed for his young attorney friend. There was, somewhere within the inscrutable professor, a spot of romance. Provided it was the other fellow. The trouble in Molly Lake's eyes receded.

"I was wondering who you were and what you were doing here," she confessed smilingly as the professor resumed eating. She indicated the note. "You've read this, of course."

Professor Toogle gave her an injured look.

"I'm sorry." Molly laughed, regarding him with new respect. "Well, Ernie has confidence in you, Professor. That goes for me, too. If you're Ernie's friend, you're mine. Father feels the same way, I'm sure. Father's a member of the city council here. That's where he is now. Marshal Kowe sent him word they're having a meeting. I don't know whether he'll be back before suppertime or not. Perhaps not."

Professor Toogle nodded thoughtfully. A little later, with an invitation to visit Molly Lake and her father that evening, the professor left the Mountaineer House, directing his steps toward the stage station to fetch his bags.

Two valises comprised the professor's luggage, both brand new. Recently he had departed from a certain New Mexico cowtown too hastily to retrieve his old ones. Both the bags he now carried were not only new, but bulgingly full. One rattled and tinkled curiously, as though freighted with glass. It was.

As he returned from the station, a glance along the streets and sidewalks showed him a crowded town. Hitch-rails were full. Boardwalks were thronged. Nester wagons clattered around. It all tended to carve grim lines of resolution in Professor Toogle's tall-browed face. His expression was that of a man exercising stern self-denial.

A ramshackle false-front next door to the Starr Saloon, however, proved irresistible. It had a roof, sidewalls and back, but no front. It drew Professor Toogle like a magnet. Stopping and setting his bags down, he tugged gently at his goatee.

Keenly he surveyed the empty expanse of store space. Evidently it had been a shoe shop for scraps of leather and other refuse littered the floor.

"What an advantageous spot to make a pitch!" the diminutive professor breathed. With a heartfelt sigh, he stooped to pick up his bags. A rough voice straightened him empty-handed. Marshal Kowe's coarse face loomed over him like a thundercloud.

"Look here, feller. I just seen Sam Lake. He said yuh're not either opening up his store. If you're tryin' to pull a shenanigan, you better watch yore step." He slapped a gunbutt dissuadingly. "They're liable to be shakin' hands with yuh in Kingdom Come. Savvy?"

Profesor Toogle stared into the lawman's evil eyes. He nodded with complete comprehension. He cleared his throat delicately, then flipped a hand at the empty store building.

"I presume it's for rent," he ventured tentatively.

"I can't say about that. Used to belong to Lafe Milburn. Starr's got charge of it right now. Talk tuh him. But don't forget what I said. You go into business here, be shore yuh abide by local ordinances."

"Yes—yes, indeed."

Professor Toogle waited politely until Marshal Kowe lumbered through the Starr Saloon batwings. Then he reached for his bags, thoughts keenly active with matters of finance. The marshal's declaration concerning old Sam Lake's statement was confirmed that evening.

During the discussion occurring in the Lakes' prettily curtained sitting room on the second floor of the Mountaineer House, the grizzled storekeeper confronted Professor Toogle and Molly with unshakable resolve. From the depths of a willow-withe rocking-chair, Sam's voice came stonily.

"No, we've done tried givin' Shootin' Starr Colby a lickin', Perfessor. All we did was get three men killed. One of them left a widder and three younguns."

MOLLY sat very straight and tense, troubledly clasping and unclasping her slim hands. At her father's words, she whitened.

"But you only did what you thought was right, Father. You had no way of foreseeing the outcome. If you'll let him try, perhaps Professor Toogle can bring those renegades to justice for murdering those men."

"Marshal Kowe," said old Sam glumly, "is an out and out killer. Make no mistake about it just 'cause he's big and clumsy-lookin'. He's durned fast with them hog-legs of his'n. Shootin' Starr—ain't no use of me commentin' on him. Now, who's going to gun-match them two, Perfessor? Not me. And I don't figger you can."

"You won't give Professor Toogle the keys and let him open the store, Father?" Molly asked.

The oldster shook his grizzled head.

"Daughter, closin' down was yore idee in the first place. Well, now I've sorta got used to it myself. I reckon we'll leave things just as they be."

Professor Toogle coughed discreetly. "You were—er—a member of the council when the tax was voted upon?" he asked.

"Yes, durn it! I voted to pass the confounded thing! It galls me plumb to the quick. But if I'd refused, Josh Raines would've too. Both of us would've prob'ly got plugged. I shore don't aim to do for Josh's wife and younguns as I did for Lafe Milburn's."

"Obviously Starr Colby's demise would be a civic improvement," the professor offered.

Old Sam exploded. "You're durned tootin'! A lot of things would happen around here! With prices now bein' charged for grub in this town, Perfessor, I'm blamed if I see how some folks eat!"

"Father's been burglarizing his own store to help some of them," Molly said softly.

"Well, I can't see nobody go hongry," old Sam growled.

"And that's precisely why I insisted you close the store," Molly said firmly. "You wouldn't have charged Starr Colby's prices, and by now you would have been in—in your grave."

Professor Toogle cleared his throat delicately. Regardless of how old Sam Lake felt about it, the professor had a job to do. He had to break Shootin' Starr Colby's ruthless grip on this town. The diminutive professor himself was not averse to earning a dishonest dollar, but

he thoroughly disapproved of depriving women and children of life's necessities. Also he had another reason.

Inevitably he would, sooner or later, run afoul of the Law again. Unless he wished to languish interminably in some remote cowtown juzgado, he had better keep on close terms with Attorney Ernie Johns. Therefore he must now tax his wits to deliver his young friend from the Colby-Kowe dilemna.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Molly said, rising when the professor bade them good night. "I had no idea Father—"

She broke off when Professor Toogle handed her a slip of paper. It was a receipt for a month's rent on the building next door to the Starr Saloon, signed by Starr Colby.

Molly read it and returned it with a wan smile. "Good night, Professor," she said softly. "And good luck."

The following morning when she knocked on the door of his room, Miss Prissy Wheatley found the professor in shirtsleeves busily at work. Professor Toogle cracked the door a scant inch, stared upward into the bony if kindly face of the local Amazon, and begged for time. Hastily donning his coat, he then admitted the landlady, but with great trepidation.

Miss Prissy's ample hand clutched a legal-looking document. "Is this what you—"

Prodigious jaw sagging, Miss Prissy glanced amazedly about.

Bottles, empty but corked, covered Professor Toogle's bed. Nearby on a chair was a stack of labels. On them was printed: TOOGLE'S MAGIC FIRE STARTER & COAL OIL STRETCHER, Price $1. In a borrowed churn in the middle of the room was a mixture that, although red, smelled suspiciously like kerosene. Beside the churn was an empty paint can. Miss Prissy had, in truth, caught the professor redhanded.

With audible effort, Professor Toogle swallowed. Miss Prissy suddenly advancing, he backed up a step. She had only spied some of the professor's finished product. Already filled and labeled, a half-dozen bottles beckoned redly from the bureau. The landlady picked one up.

"How do you use this, Professor?" she asked interestedly.

Professor Toogle took courage. His brows leaped upward. He tugged gently at his goatee.

"Two drops to a gallon of coal oil, madam," he said politely.

"And it really makes it go further?"

"Yes, indeed, madam." The professor stilled his inner qualms with the knowledge that he was telling Miss Prissy the truth, although how much farther was somewhat infinitesimal.

"My granddaddy invented some salve one time," Miss Prissy murmured reflectively.

Returning to the business at hand, Miss Prissy slapped the bottle down, shook the legal paper under Professor Toogle's outsized nose, and fixed him with a stern gaze.

"Look at this all you want to," she warned, "but don't you dare get off with it!"

The professor perused the legal instrument intently. It was a permit for the Mountaineer House to do business within the corporate limits of the city of Skull Point, Texas, and was signed by Vorton Kowe as city clerk. Professor Toogle scrutinized it minutely. When he had ended his period of utter concentration, he looked up to find his landlady gone.

It was just as well. He wasn't quite as fearful of her as of Starr Colby, but almost. He knew with certainty that Starr Colby was a threat to his life. He had only suspicions where the landlady was concerned. Nevertheless it looked very much as though Miss Prissy had designs on his liberty. He must keep a watchful eye out.

THE swarthy, mustached, snake-slim Starr Colby came out of a backroom of his saloon the following afternoon with an expression of alert disapproval on his dark face. It was as though Colby had received information that had pulled him away from more pleasant matters.

Professor Toogle, having a double shot of rye at the lower end of the bar, surmised this because of the Jezebel giggles that emerged from the back room with Starr. Nodding briefly at Toogle, the saloon man made his way through the smoke-shrouded crowd to where Marshal Kowe was bucking the faro tiger.

Hastening over, Professor Toogle gras-

ped the difficulty instantly. "Listen to reason, Vort," Starr Colby said wearily. "I don't care if yuh gamble. That's yore privilege. But some of the money you lost here was mine."

Marshal Kowe frowned. "What's the difference? It's yore game. I lose it; you win it. You don't make sense to me, Starr."

Colby threw his fingers at the croupiers and dealers. "They get their cuts, Vort. They can't keep a special set of books on what's yores and what's mine. What you slide across the tables looks like any other money to them. I don't want them taking cuts out of what's mine to begin with, do I?"

Marshal Kowe kept frowning, saying nothing. Colby was trying hard to control his temper, and his dark face bore the strain.

"Yuh're forcin' me to tighten down on yuh, Vort. Yuh can't keep just going on and on and on. After this, you bring me my share as soon as yuh get it. Sabe?"

Marshal Kowe raised his hand to hide a grin. It wasn't on his face—on a round-chinned gent's standing beside him. When the commotion had died down, the marshal nodded sullenly.

"All right. And you be shore you do me the same way, Starr."

Colby smiled thinly. "Well, come on in the back room and have a drink. Get yore mind off these blasted cards."

Marshal Kowe turned obediently to follow. Professor Toogle cleared his throat discreetly, stepped forward and touched the marshal on the arm. Both Kowe and Colby stopped.

Toogle thrust a roll of bills into Marshal Kowe's paw. "Here's that other hundred, sir," he said politely.

The professor cut briskly toward the batwings. The fat-witted marshal looked at the money, at the departing professor, at the money again. Then he scratched his blond mane. "What the hades is he talkin' about?" he asked Starr.

Marshal Kowe was startled half out of his dirty levis the following Saturday afternoon. Shouts of alarm spun him in time to see the roily cloud of black smoke in front of the ramshackle building next door to the Starr Saloon. Having touched off the gunpowder, Professor Toogle swept the megaphone to his lips. For a small man, his ballyhoo was stentorian.

"Fire! Fire! Fire—is what you want on a cold morning, folks! Step up, step up! Come right on down! Everybody welcome! Close right in and learn all about the greatest discovery since drinking water! It's immense! It's gigantic! It's colossal!"

He thrust a bottle of red liquid into the air.

"Here's a little item, folks—a boon to humanity! Representing years of research! Countless hours of sweat and toil! Month after month of patient trial and error! And why? So that—"

The professor broke off abruptly as Marshal Kowe barged through the front ranks of the converging populace. Marshal Kowe smiled crookedly before he turned to disperse the crowd with snarled invective.

"I warned you, Perfessor!" he rasped then.

The muzzle of Professor Toogle's .41 derringer bumped him rudely in the stomach.

"I have no objection to honest graft," Professor Toogle stated, dark orbs presaging death, "but you've had your cut. Now I shall have mine."

Marshal Kowe gulped, hands wide of his guns. "That hundred dollars? I give that back to yuh. It was a mistake, you said. Told me you borrowed it off another feller and got to thinkin' it was me. 'Sides that, I had a devil of a time explainin' it to Starr."

"I'm not referring to that." Toogle flipped a piece of paper from his pocket. "Take a look at this."

Marshal Kowe saw a receipt for a thousand dollars, signed by Starr Colby. He looked pained.

"Starr oughta tell me these things. I didn't know you had it. How'll I know what's goin' on if Starr don't tell me? Shore, yuh had a perfect right to peddle yore snake-oil, but how in hades was I to know it?"

"That is immaterial to me," Professor Toogle said coldly. "If you're telling the truth, that ends it. If you're trying to overreach me—beware. I resent being duped."

GROWLING and muttering angrily, Marshal Kowe headed for the sa-

loon. Professor Toogle put away his derringer. He picked up the megaphone and juggled it idly, but he made no attempt to summon another crowd.

Marshal Kowe emerged from the Starr Saloon, fiery red of face. He stopped and heaved a thumb over his shoulder. "Perfessor!"

Dutifully Professor Toogle followed. The marshal led the way into a back room, empty save for poker table, chairs, and spittoons. Starr Colby said nothing until he had closed the door, bolted it, and put a hip on the edge of the table.

"Let's see it, Professor," Colby said then, his voice quiet but skeptical.

Professor Toogle had a premonition of disaster as he met the slitted gaze of the swarthy boss of Skull Point. The man was far more dangerous than he had assumed.

"What—my permit?" Toogle asked, rummaging through his pockets.

"The receipt," Marshal Kowe growled.

"Bluff it out to the bitter end, Vort," Colby said curtly.

Professor Toogle shot a look at the marshal and handed his city license to Starr Colby.

Colby slapped it down on the table and jerked erect, white of face. "Where's my cut, Vort?"

Marshal Kowe put the table between himself and Shootin' Starr Colby. "That ain't my writin', Starr! I swear it ain't! Like I told yuh, the city hall was broke into and some of them blanks stole! Honest, Starr—"

Professor Toogle reeled backward as gunfire shocked his senses. Pulling the table with him, Marshal Kowe fell. Holding the smoking gun ready, Colby moved slowly around to kick the table aside. His swarthy face was distorted with rage.

Shot through the body, Marshal sucked in a gurgly breath.

"Honest, Starr—search him—search—"

Fear sliced through the professor's stomach. An examination of his pockets would irrefutably convict him. The derringer whipped into his palm, but his eardrums caught no gun report. He didn't hear the crash of the door as men broke into the room, but somewhat later he heard them talking.

"You can see by the signs what happened," a man was saying. "Starr shot the marshal here first. Then he cut loose at the perfessor. When he done that, Marshal Kowe got his gun out and blowed the back of Starr's head off."

A man cursed sharply almost in the professor's ear.

"Give me a hand here, men. Let's get somethin' done. The perfessor ain't dead. He's bloody as a stuck hog, but he's shore as shootin' alive."

DROWSINESS overcame the professor as he was lifted. When he next regained his senses, he was in a bed, he realized. The air smelled differently, cleaner. He couldn't lift his hands or move, and there was a bandage over his eyes, but he was comfortable.

He could hear distinctly. He could even identify the voices. He heard Attorney Ernie Johns' and Molly Lake's, then old Sam's, a couple of unfamiliar ones. Then he was seized with panic.

"I just live for the day he'll be up and around again, the brave little fellow," Miss Prissy said. "He's the intellectual type. So clever and so—so elegant-mannered. He doesn't like to talk about it, but one of his relations by marriage signed the Declaration of Independence. That's why he's made a hobby of calligraphy—that's beautiful writing, you know."

Miss Prissy laughed gently.

"Ah, yes, I'm very fond of Professor Toogle. He's so accomplished and everything you sort of forget he's a runt."

With a mighty effort, Professor Toogle sat up.

"A runt, madam—" Oh, what was the use? He was much too weak to talk. He would lie and regain his strength. Then he would fix Miss Prissy. He would get the hades out.

THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON, an exciting novel of the owlhoot by Jim Mayo, plus action novelets by Walt Coburn and W. C. Tuttle and many other stories and features—in the October issue of GIANT WESTERN! Now on sale, 25c at all stands!

The cowboys pulled Art's arms back and kept him from making any resistance

PAYDAY BRAWL

By RALEY BRIEN

It requires more than tough cowboys and railroad gandy dancers to stop a stubborn lawman from doing his duty!

IN THE pink dawn, Deputy Sheriff Art Swinton arose from his bunk to face a day of trouble. He tossed his blankets aside and sat on the bunk's edge, in deep thought.

He remembered that today was expected to bring a crisis in local affairs. If it did he would

have foes on every side. It was not a pleasant thought, but one that had to be considered from all angles.

He dressed quickly, got a fire going in the little cook stove, and put on the coffeepot and a skillet. Then he strolled across the room and peered through a window.

The sky was cloudless. It was the middle of August, and this would be a blistering day. And the blazing merciless sun, its rays striking human eyes, might impair accuracy in gunfire at a critical moment.

Art cooked and ate breakfast, cleansed his utensils and straightened his bedding. He always kept his two-room cabin clean and shipshape. The cabin was on a hillside, and overlooked the only street of Temple Rock, a little cowtown so named because of a queer red rock formation on the plateau not far away. Art had rented the cabin from a man who had gone to another district to work in a mine.

Recently, Art had patterned his future life. He had been a good ranch hand, but he was done with being a bunkhouse man. He had some money his father had left him, and he was in love. The object of his adoration was Sarah Mowery, daughter of Ed Mowery, who owned the Temple Rock Store. Art was cultivating in Mowery's mind the idea of buying an interest in the store, marrying Sarah, erecting an extra room to the store building, and settling down in life.

He had become a deputy sheriff almost by accident. The sheriff needed a deputy at Temple Rock to keep the cowhands peaceful on range paydays. Art took the job for the few dollars it would bring him, enough for grub and cigarette tobacco.

He was small for a cowhand, known as "Runt" to his bunkhouse mates. And he was too timid-looking for a deputy who had to handle tough range men. But he got away with it because he had been a cowhand himself, knew the lingo, and found that personal persuasion worked better than violence. He had decided that he would quit the deputy's job when he bought into the store and got married.

BUT a short time before the deputy's job had begun to look like the real thing. The railroad running through town was relaying its main line track. A crew of thirty track layers had appeared and built a camp a mile out of town where there was a good well. When it came to toughness, these track layers made cowpunchers of the Double Star and other ranches in the neighborhood look like docile babes.

It soon got so a range rider dared not be caught in Don Cutler's saloon by track layers unless he wanted to be pushed around. Between the track layers and cowhands was a deep and dangerous animosity, for some unknown reason.

The track crew was commanded by Jeff Bates, a giant of a man who held his position by brute force as much as by ability. Bates held his men in, but could not be expected to control them forever under certain circumstances. And today those circumstances would come to a focus.

This was the regular monthly range payday for the cowhands. William Luddy, owner of the Double Star, had declared he always had paid off on the first of the month and would continue to do so regardless of railroad track layers.

As if fate had been busy cooking up a sour brew, the railroad officials back at headquarters had changed the route of the pay car, and starting with this trip it would stop to pay off the Temple Rock gang on the first also—which was today.

Expecting serious trouble, Art had asked the sheriff for help. But the old sheriff, safe and secure behind a battered desk in his office at the county seat, twenty miles away, had declared Art was alarmed over nothing, and had said he expected Art to face any situation and overcome any obstacle to the peace.

The townsmen were in a state of nervous tension. For a week, Art had been having daytime nightmares. Track layers and cowpunchers, both just paid off and with money in their pockets, only one store in town and one saloon across the street from it—such a setup looked perilous.

In his cabin, after straightening things and sweeping out, Art buckled on his gunbelt. He stuffed cartridges into the belt's loops, went out and closed the door, and followed a narrow winding path down to the street. His first stop was the saloon, where fat, middle-aged Don Cutler had just opened up.

"Could do a month's business today, if things are peaceful hereabouts," Cutler remarked. "Hope they don't wreck my

place. Bar mirrors, windows and glasses cost money. I've hired Bill Wilkes to help me 'tend bar."

"Maybe everything will be all right," Art suggested.

"You know cussed well you're just sayin' that to make me feel easy," Cutler accused. "Some jasper will speak out of turn, then the riot will start. And what can you do to stop it?"

That last remark was a reflection on Art's prowess. He glared at Cutler and went on down the street. If that was the way Cutler felt, let him take care of his own troubles without any help from the constabulary!

Art's next stop was at the store. Ed Mowery had the place open and was sweeping it out, and Sarah came into the store from a rear room as Art entered from the front.

"Expect we'll be busy today," Mowery told Art. "Them track layers owe me quite a sum, but Jeff Bates promised to take it outen their money as they got paid, 'fore they can get to the saloon and start drinkin' and gamblin'."

"That's good," Art replied.

"Expect there'll be trouble before the day is over. It's too much of the sheriff to ask you to handle the situation alone."

"Oh, I aim to get along!" Art boasted.

"You'll handle them all right, honey," Sarah told him. "Don't you fret about it. Just be firm. Take care of yourself. If there's trouble, keep out of it."

"If there's trouble, I'll have to be in the middle of it," Art replied. "I'm wearin' a deputy's badge, remember? Took an oath to preserve the peace."

Feeling slightly better, he left the store and hurried to the jail. Sarah had stood up for him! That was the kind of girl to have!

THE Temple Rock jail was a small affair of concrete with a single cell in it, and had been built when the railroad was being constructed. It was badly needed then, but now was scarcely ever used except to house some belligerent intoxicated cowboy while he cooled off.

Art unlocked the jail and went inside, unlocked the cell door and left it so. He opened a window, and got a pail of fresh water and put it into the cell. When he left, he did not lock the outside door, but left it ajar, so he could kick it wide open easily while handling a fighting prisoner, if it came to that.

From the jail, Art went to the little railroad depot. Lem Addison, the local agent, was a friend of Art's. He was middle-aged, bald, squinted, had stooped shoulders, and was far from the vigorous go-getter type. He looked like a man who'd given up.

"What time'll the pay car get here?" Art asked.

"'Bout nine," Lem replied. "It won't take long to pay off thirty men. Lookin' for trouble, Art?"

"Expectin' some. William Luddy wouldn't change pay-day for his Double Star. Another ranch outfit payin' today, too. Take thirty track layers and about the same number of cowhands all charged up with red eye, and what've you got?"

"A riot," Lem suggested. "What you aim to do, Art? Let'm fight it out?"

"Sheriff'd raise blazes with me if I did that."

"'Tain't right for him not to send you help. If things get too hot, Art, I'll wire him there's trouble."

"Don't be in any hurry," Art replied. "Maybe this situation can be handled. It's half past eight now." He had glanced at the clock in the ticket office.

From the distance came sounds of howling and raucous song. Down the track toward the depot rolled two handcars, their pump-handles being worked by eager men. Each handcar was drawing a couple of flats loaded with track layers. They were coming to get their pay and make this a holiday.

The handcars were stopped at the station and lifted from the rails and put beside the track. The crew danced and cut up like a bunch of schoolboys released for a vacation. Jeff Bates got upon the depot platform and strode toward the door, where Lem Addison and Art were standing.

"How's the pay car?" Bates asked Addison.

"Should be here in less'n half an hour."

Jeff Bates was tall and huge in body. Above the waist he wore only a sleeveless undershirt, and exhibited biceps large enough to startle a beholder. His face had been broiled by the sun. He had a heavy black mustache, and stroked its ends

every few seconds.

The track layers gathered at one end of the platform and put their heads together and talked like a bunch of conspirators. That did not escape Art. They were up to something, he decided, and whatever it was they were up to no doubt it was no good for the peace and welfare of the community.

Jeff Bates turned from the depot agent and faced him.

"Well, Deputy, I see you're ready," Bates said. "Got your badge all shined up and your gun strapped on. Expectin' some trouble?"

"Hope there isn't any," Art replied. "No sense in trouble as I can see."

"If there is trouble, what are you goin' to do?" Bates' voice held the tone of a sneer as he stood with arms akimbo and looked down at the smaller man.

"Oh, I'll be around!" Art said. "I think you can control your men, Mr. Bates."

"Why should I? control 'em, all right, on the job. But this is their day off, and I ain't a nursemaid."

FROWNING, the deputy sheriff stared at the railroad foreman.

"You mean that if they start trouble you won't try to stop it?" Art asked, his eyes wide.

"I'll prob'ly be 'tendin' to my own business. If there's any trouble, it'll be the fault of the range men. They've been talkin' wild, sayin' the track layers are a bunch of scum and all that."

"I doubt it," Art told him. "Somebody's been spreadin' talk like that. Gene Hanes, foreman of the Double Star, was tellin' me couple of days ago that your track layers had been sayin' all cowpunchers were bowlegged idots. That ain't so. I've been a puncher, and I ain't bowlegged or an idiot. Just goes to show what silly talk can do."

Bates bent toward him. "So you've been a cowpuncher, and now you're deputy sheriff. I suppose if there's a ruckus you'll side the cowpunchers, huh? Is that it?"

"I'm a deputy, and I side the Law."

This talk was leading toward trouble, Art saw. But it was cut short by the shrill whistle of a locomotive, and around a curve down the track came a cloud of black smoke, and from the cloud emerged engine and pay car.

"Here comes your money," Lem Addison told Bates. "Now everybody can be happy."

Bates hurried to the end of the platform to line up his men alphabetically. The locomotive stopped while a switch was thrown, then pulled the pay car onto a siding and came on. The car was finally stopped opposite the depot.

"I'm collectin' from your wages what you owe at Mowery's store," Bates was telling his men. "Road's regulations demand it. Can't have merchants along the line hatin' the road. Line up, there! Take it easy!"

The track layers went in one door of the pay car and made their exit from another after receiving their pay. They stuffed money into their pockets, and singly and in bunches began walking up the street after the manner of men going to a fire. They headed for Don Cutler's saloon.

Art strolled after them and stopped at a small concrete building which held a branch of a county seat bank. This branch bank was opened only a couple of times a month. Two men from the county seat had brought money with which to pay off the Double Star outfit and a couple of smaller ones.

"Tough bunch," one of the bank men said to Art, indicating the track layers. "Glad we don't have to handle 'em. We'll pay off the ranch riders and catch the late afternoon train back to the county seat."

"The cowpunchers generally get to town about ten," Art remarked, in case the bank man did not know. "Old William Luddy heads his bunch in a buckboard. Better see Ed Mowery at the store before you leave. He'll have cash to deposit, and you can carry it to the county seat. The track layers have been tradin' heavy with him."

It was a quarter after ten when a cloud of dust announced the approach of the Double Star contingent. William Luddy was driving a team of colts to his buckboard. His long whiskers parted in the middle and whipped back over his shoulders with the force of the wind. Gene Hanes, his foreman, sat on the seat with him, and Hanes' pony was tied on behind.

The Double Star punchers rode a short distance behind the buckboard. This morning, things were not as usual. Generally, the Double Star men came into

town whooping and discharging their six-guns toward the saffron sky.

But today there was nothing like that. They rode in an orderly manner, and were quiet. They dismounted and tied their ponies to the hitchrail in front of Mowery's store and in front of the bank. Luddy left Hanes to tie the colts, and entered the bank with a nod to Art, to check his accounts with the bank men and see his punchers paid. The punchers greeted Art cordially and strode inside to line up and get their wages.

Too quiet, Art thought. It wasn't natural. The scent of trouble was in the air. He spoke to Gene Hanes:

"Boys quiet today."

"Yeah," Hanes agreed. The foreman hurried on into the bank without elaborating his statement.

RIDERS from two small outfits came galloping into town without a whoop or a shot, and stopped at the bank to get their pay. They mingled with the Double Star men and held whispered conversations. As punchers emerged with their money, they gathered on the walk instead of scattering.

William Luddy finally came out with Gene Hanes.

"Go to Mowery's store first, boys, and pay your bills if any," the owner of the Double Star ordered. "Buy what you need before you get to playin' poker and gulpin' redeye. Hit the home trail at sunset, and be able to set your saddles."

The cowpunchers moved up the walk toward the store, passing the blacksmith shop without the usual horseplay with the blacksmith. Not natural, Art thought.

Hanes followed the men. Luddy had a few more words with one of the bank men, then approached Art.

"Hope you don't have trouble today, Art," Luddy said. "If a riot starts, don't be a fool and try to stop it single-handed."

"You'll be here to handle your men," Art hinted.

"I've got to drive right back to the Double Star soon as I get the mail and order some things from Mowery," Luddy declared. He hurried up the street.

So! William Luddy wouldn't spend the day in Temple Rock—and that wasn't natural, either. Luddy didn't want to be there if anything happened, didn't want to be placed in a position of responsibility. It looked bad to Art.

The range men were going into the store on this side of the street. The track layers had taken possession of the saloon on the opposite side. In a natural course of events, the range men would soon want to go to the saloon and the track layers might want to buy things at the store. And right then was when trouble could start.

Art hitched up his overalls, adjusted his gunbelt, tugged at the brim of his hat so it would shade his eyes from the sun better, and began strolling toward the scene of possible carnage.

Before he came to the store, Art could tell by the sounds that the track layers already had reached the loud-talking stage. Without doubt, they were inclined to an old-fashioned wild spree.

William Luddy emerged from the store with his foreman, Gene Hanes, beside him. Luddy carried a bundle of mail and a grain sack half filled with things he had left Hanes and hurried past Art with a nod to untie his colts, get into his buckboard and leave town in a cloud of dust. Hanes remained standing in front of the store. Art approached him.

"Mr. Luddy's hittin' for the ranch a mite early this pay day," Art suggested. got in the store. The Double Star's owner "Don't want to be around if trouble starts, huh? Kind of passin' it on to you."

"How you mean?" Gene Hanes asked.

"You're the Double Star foreman, responsible next to the owner," Art pointed out. "That's the law of it. And you're here on the ground."

"If there's trouble, the track layers will start it," Hanes interrupted. "Our boys are about finished with payin' their bills to Mowery and buyin' tobacco and hard candy and shirts and socks. They'll be wantin' to go across to the saloon pretty quick to get a few drinks and maybe play a little poker, same as they always do on pay day."

"Seems to me they're packin' more hardware than usual," Art hinted.

"I really haven't noticed."

Art's eyes narrowed. "I worked under you on the Double Star once," he reminded Hanes. "I like you, Gene. Like the boys, too. Hate to have to do anything agin you. But I'm a deputy sheriff now,

for the time bein', and I've got my sworn duty to do. Understand?"

"I understand that if you're wise you'll make yourself scarce if trouble starts," Hanes told him. "You can easy enough say you couldn't handle the situation alone and that the sheriff wouldn't send help."

STUBBORNLY the little deputy sheriff shook his head.

"I could do and say that, but it ain't my nature," Art replied, speaking softly. "I don't see why the two gangs can't get along. The track layers say the punchers have been makin' remarks about 'em, and the punchers say the same about the track layers. Some liar has been fomentin' trouble."

"I wouldn't put anything past that bunch of scum that's layin' track," Hanes declared.

"There you go! Jeff Bates is prob'ly sayin' somethin' like that about the punchers right now. He accused me of bein' ready to side the punchers 'cause I've been one."

"Why don't you go into the back room of the store and talk to your girl when she ain't busy waitin' on trade?" Hanes asked. "Don't see or hear anything but her."

"So you're determined to have trouble?"

"Only if the track layers start it, and they prob'ly will," Hanes replied.

Half a dozen Double Star men emerged from the store and stood just behind Hanes. Art glanced across the street. Jeff Bates, laughing raucously at something, had come from the saloon to stand in front of it on the walk, and track layers jammed the wide doorway behind him and peered through the windows.

"I'm askin' you to have sense, Art," Hanes said. "How can any one man sail in and stop a brawl between fifty or sixty men? I don't want to see you bad hurt."

"Then see to it that there ain't any brawl," Art suggested.

"Listen, Art. My boys have a right to have their usual fun this pay day. The track layers are in the saloon, and they've sent word that they're goin' to stay there and keep all cowpunchers out. Then they'll brag up and down the line that all the Temple Rock punchers went dry through pay day. It wouldn't kill any of the boys to go without a drink. But they won't stay out of that saloon 'cause the track layers say the must. That wouldn't be right, and you know it."

"Maybe I can talk to Jeff Bates," Art replied.

"He already hates you 'cause you used to be a bunkhouse and saddle man. 'Twouldn't do you any good to talk to him."

Art looked up the street. Beyond the blacksmith shop, a hundred feet away, cowpunchers by twos and threes were darting across the thoroughfare. They were not noticed by Bates and his men, because the latter were looking toward the store and Hanes.

"Where are those punchers goin'?" Art asked Hanes.

"Take it easy, now! The boys are slippin' across to come up back of the saloon and walk in the rear door while the track layers are watchin' the front."

"Did you plan that, Gene?"

"Maybe so," Hanes admitted.

Art's eyes flamed. "If I had good proof of that, I'd slap you in jail for startin' a riot."

"Don't let that deputy's badge go to your head, Art. And remember this—them track layers will be gone in a couple of months, and you'll have to live here after they're gone. You wouldn't be happy if all the punchers hereabouts were agin you. And the sheriff will think twice before offendin' William Luddy, who owns the big Double Star and heads all the stockmen in this district."

"I'll go over to the saloon."

"Don't head into this mess 'less you want to get hurt," Hanes interrupted. "We don't want you to get hurt, Art. It's hard luck you're wearin' that badge. We like you, and we like your girl. Bunkhouse men hereabouts are all for you gettin' married and settlin' down and helpin' run the store. I reckon we've got to see you're protected from your own self. Take him, boys!"

The Double Star foreman gestured and stepped aside as he finished speaking. The half dozen punchers who had emerged from the store a moment before rushed forward. Almost before Art realized what was happening, they had seized him, had taken away his gun and bent his arms be-

hind his back, and were hurrying him along the street.

HE TRIED to kick and fight, but he was a small man and they were six large and stronger ones. They were telling him that it was for his own good. Laughter rang down the street behind him as Jeff Bates and the track layers saw how he was being handled.

They took Art forcibly to the jail, the door of which he had left ajar. They opened the cell and tossed him inside, and locked the cell door and threw the key into a far corner of the room. They put Art's gun on a stool in another corner.

"Now you won't get hurt," one of the Double Star men said. "Hanes don't want you hurt, and neither do we. You can say you were powerless to do anything—tell that to the old sheriff."

"I'll have you jailed for obstructin' the Law!" Art cried at them.

"Shucks! Your word only—and a couple of dozen of us ready to swear we never done it. Be glad we thought this up."

From the street came a chorus of howls and shrill cries, the sound of smashing glass.

"Come on, it's started!" the man nearest the door yelled.

They slammed the outer door shut after they had hurried out, and Art heard the big key turned in the lock. And he heard their boots grinding gravel as they ran down the hillside to the street. A shot sounded—more shots. A woman screamed.

One thing his abductors had not known. In a hip pocket Art always carried duplicate keys to the cell and the front door of the jail. They had not searched him, had only taken his gun.

Humiliation stung him. He was here through no fault of his own, here because brute force had been exerted on him. And here in jail he would not be hurt while trying to prevent, single-handed, a riot of fifty or sixty men.

But he could not be the laughing-stock of the entire Temple Rock range. Men wouldn't respect him. Sarah Mowery, regardless of how much she loved him, could not respect her husband if she married him. He would be a liability to the store instead of an asset. No doubt Mowery would refuse to sell him an interest.

He felt indignity and incompetence so strongly that his eyes smarted with unshed tears. Art took a deep breath, thrust out his lower jaw, and got the duplicate keys out of his hip pocket.

He thrust his hands through the cell bars, inserted the proper key and after a little difficulty managed to unlock the cell door. He swung the door open, removing the key and putting it into his hip pocket again.

For a moment he stopped to get his gun off the stool where they had left it and make a swift examination of it to make sure the cartridges had not been removed. Then he hurried across the few feet to the front door. From the distant street came howls and sounds of conflict.

At the front door, he met with an obstacle. The heavy key had been left in the lock on the outside. Art could not force it out so he could use the duplicate key from the inside. He hurried to the window.

Outside the window was a network of metal bars embedded in the masonry. But two of the bars had been loose for some time; he had neglected to repair them becase the window was outside the cell and could not be reached by a prisoner.

He worked one of the bars out and used it as a lever to attack the others. There were five bars in all, and Art got out four. The fifth he was unable to pry out, but he bent it back in the middle as much as he could.

Even for a man of his rather small size, the window was small, scarcely more than a mere ventilator. Art got upon the stool and thrust his head through the opening and began squirming and trying to work his shoulders through. It was a rather tough job. He tore his shirt in a dozen places and scraped skin off his shoulders and arms. He worked and tugged while the perspiration streamed from his body and he was almost exhausted.

PREPARATORY to making a last desperate effort, he rested a moment. Loud yells were coming from the street, and the yelling was punctuated by shots. He thought, during a lull in the din, that he heard a woman crying somewhere. Glass crashes were occurring at intervals.

Now he removed his gunbelt and got it

through the window and hung it around his neck. In case of emergency, he could get at the gun and use it even if stuck in the window. That he began the task of wriggling his hips through.

He tore his overalls and scraped skin off one knee, but finally he dropped head foremost the few feet to the hard ground. He rested there a moment in the spot of shade cast by the little jail building, got upon his feet and hitched up his overalls, tucked his shirt into them better, and buckled on his gunbelt.

At the corner of the jail, he flattened himself against the building and peered down at the street to acquaint himself with the situation.

The blacksmith was standing at one side of the smithy door and looking up the street. The door of the bank had been closed. Art could see the front of the store, and one window had been smashed. He could not see the front of the saloon on the other side of the street, but gun explosions came from it, and wisps of smoke drifted on the wind. Answering fire came from the smashed window of the store as men popped into sight to fire and then dropped out of sight again.

He could see the rear door of the saloon though, and a man came out and filled a pail with water from the barrel kept there. The man was a Double Star cowpuncher. So Art judged that the range men had invaded the saloon through the rear door and had driven the track layers out and across the street to the store. The two forces had changed positions.

Every cowpuncher carried a gun, but not all the track layers did. Art supposed there was not more than half a dozen guns among the railroad men. Their style of fighting ran more to fists and knives.

The sun was blistering and heat waves danced across the scene. The battle seemed to be at a standstill now except for a little spasmodic shooting, which probably was more to work on nerves than to cause injury or death.

Art considered his own situation briefly. Range men had jailed him, no doubt thinking they were doing him a favor. They intended keep him from getting hurt and to furnish him an alibi with the sheriff.

But to Art's mind they had treated him like a callow boy, had made him look like one to the entire district, and he had to make a move to regain his self respect and the respect of others. He didn't want Sarah to think her potential husband was a weakling; and he didn't want other men to think he could not handle himself in an appropriate manner.

He was trying to think of a method of attack. He left the jail and kept behind boulders as much as he could as he descended the hillside to the street; he did not want to be seen yet and have everybody learn he had got out of the jail.

Behind the blacksmith shop he met Lem Addison, the railroad agent, who had slipped up there from the depot and was watching the fight.

"Art! How'd you get out?" Lem asked.

"Broke out."

"I'd have gone to the jail and helped you, but they were watchin' to see if anybody did. When they put you into your own jail, I wired the sheriff. Got an answer a few minutes ago. The sheriff's comin' with a bunch of armed men. Hitched a flat car behind an engine and cleared the track for him."

"Then I've got to hustle," Art said. "I want to have everything under control when the sheriff gets here. You know what's happened?"

ART shook his head gloomily as he stared at Addison.

"The punchers got in the back door of the saloon and drove the track layers out, and then went across the street to the store. Billy Wilkes, the bartender, had his head busted with a bottle. A puncher got a bad cut across his shoulder, and two track layers got gunshot wounds, neither serious."

"That's serious enough," Art said.

"Jeff Bates is in the store bossin' his men, and Gene Hanes is in the saloon with the punchers. The track men are threatenin' to burn the store. Don Cutler was tied up in his saloon and rolled agin a wall."

"Thanks," Art said. "Reckon I'd better get busy now."

"Wait till the sheriff and his men get here."

"Can't do that. This is my business. You keep out of harm's way, Lem. Get back to your depot and tell the sheriff what's happened when he gets here."

Lem Addison scurried away, keeping

under cover as much as possible. Art walked into the rear of the smithy, throwing a scare into the smith who was standing in front.

"Art! How'd you get out—and what're you goin' to do?" the blacksmith demanded.

"You keep inside out of trouble," Art growled at him.

Art got his gun out of its holster and walked to the middle of the street and started striding up it. He kicked up a cloud of the fine dust with lagging boots, but drove himself on, gathering his courage to the last iota. Men were yelling in both store and saloon, and a couple more harmless shots were fired.

Somebody in the saloon saw Art's grim advance and yelled. Those in the store saw him also. Art stopped in the middle of the street between store and saloon, held his gun high over his head and fired a single shot as an indication that he wanted silence. He got it.

"Listen to me!" Art shouted. "You're resistin' a law officer if you don't do what I say. You can shoot me down easy enough, but you kill me and it's murder and you'll swing, maybe several of you. Understand? Me, I'm in a different position. I'm an officer and have a right to shoot if you resist. And I'll shoot—shoot to kill—'less you do as I say."

He stopped shouting and waited a moment. There was no reply from either saloon or store.

"You've done enough harm for one day," Art continued. "The sheriff's on his way here with a posse on a flatcar. If there's a fight, there'll be men killed and hurt and jailed. I can prevent that if you help me. I want Jeff Bates and Gene Hanes to come out here to me, pronto! Snap it up! I'll shoot the first man who makes a bad move. If any of you feel like swingin', shoot me. Come out, Bates and Hanes!"

There was a moment of waiting, and then Gene Hanes emerged from the saloon, his gun in its holster. Jeff Bates came out of the store holding a bludgeon, which he tossed aside. They walked slowly, on guard, to where Art was standing.

"Stop there!" Art said, when he thought they were close enough. "You listen! Hanes, order the punchers to hit their saddles and ride. Get 'em out of town 'fore the sheriff gets here. Bates, order your men to get their handcars and hit for their camp, and make it quick! I'll put you two in jail and hold you for the sheriff. Do this, and it'll be a fine for each of you, and your men won't be bothered beyond maybe gettin' a lecture from the sheriff."

"The punchers shot two of my men," Bates said.

"Neither bad hurt."

"A track layer knifed one of mine," Hanes reported.

"Not bad hurt. You and your men'll have to make good the damage in store and saloon. Order your men as I said—you first, Bates. Tell your track layers to hurry to the depot and get the handcars and hit for camp. Then we'll have the punchers come out of the saloon and hit their saddles."

"After I send my men away, maybe the punchers won't go," Jeff Bates suggested.

"They'll go, if I have to shoot a couple of 'em to get 'em started. I can shoot legal around here, and nobody else can. Hurry it up! The sheriff'll be gettin' here."

JEFF BATES shouted to his men. He was a man whose orders were always obeyed without question. The track layers came rushing out of the store, and when Bates explained hurried down the street to get their handcars and leave town. Sobered by the trouble, they did not seek more—such as being arrested and fined and perhaps ordered out of the district.

Gene Hanes yelled at his astonished punchers, and they came from the saloon. They had paid their bills at Mowery's store before the trouble had begun, had made their purchases, had had their drinks, and there was nothing to hold them. They got their ponies and rode out of town, their minds also dealing with fines and possibly terms in jail.

"March, now!" Art ordered his two prisoners. "Step along! I'm meanin' it! You made me look even smaller than I am today, and I aim to square the books. I can shoot legal, remember."

He marched them to the jail while townsmen emerged from places of security and watched. He locked Bates in the cell and left Hanes in the outer room; neither was armed now and the window

was too small for Hanes, a giant, to get through it. They would be safe.

Art locked the outside door and put the key into his pocket. As he started to descend the street, a locomotive roared into the station and stopped, and the sheriff and about twenty armed men sprang off the flatcar and scattered to advance up the street.

Art met them in the street between the store and saloon.

"Sorry Lem Addison bothered you, sheriff," he said. "We had a little mess here, and there's a mite of cleanin' up to do, but the ruckus is over. I've got Jeff Bates and Gene Hanes in jail. They need finin', I suppose. And there's damage to be paid for."

The sheriff and his men scattered to look at the damage and inspect the wounded men, over whom the Temple Rock doctor had been working. Art wandered into the store, where Sarah Mowery rushed up to him and clung to his arm.

"Art—Art!" she whispered. Her eyes were glowing.

Art helped Mowery sweep up broken glass and paste heavy wrapping paper over the broken window, and put back stuff that had been knocked off the shelves. Then he hurried across to the saloon, where Don Cutler was muttering imprecations as he made an estimate of the damage. The bar mirror was broken, and one window and a lot of glassware and perhaps a dozen bottles that had been used as weapons.

The sheriff got Art in a corner.

"Art, you're the kind of man I want for a deputy," the sheriff said. "I don't mean here in Temple Rock—I mean in the county seat. A reg'lar all-time deputy. One of my best men is goin' to quit!"

"And I'm not goin' to take his job," Art broke in, grinning. "I'm goin' to buy into Mowery's store and get married. And don't try to argue with me about it, sheriff. Today I don't feel like arguin'."

The Polite Bandit

A "RAFFLES" type of character was Harold Stone. New Mexicans of the 1850s and 1860s called him the "Polite Bandit"—Mr. Stone to his face. The polite bandit always operated alone but didn't hesitate to tackle groups of three or four men at a time. Occasionally he held up a stage coach.

His outstanding quality was his politeness. He addressed all ladies as "madam" and all men as "sir," regardless of the circumstances. In the presence of ladies he always removed his hat even though one hand was busy holding a pistol.

He once robbed a United States Congressman who was later impeached for accepting bribes. Another victim was a famous singer touring the West whom he relieved of jewels and purse after duly apologizing for his act and complimenting her on her latest performance, which he had attended. He robbed a prosperous rancher but apologized for delaying the cattleman on his journey.

Stone and a deputy exchanged shots outside of Moriarty in 1857 and the deputy was wounded. Stone deposited him on the sheriff's doorstep with a note: "Sorry to mark up your property—but it strayed from home."

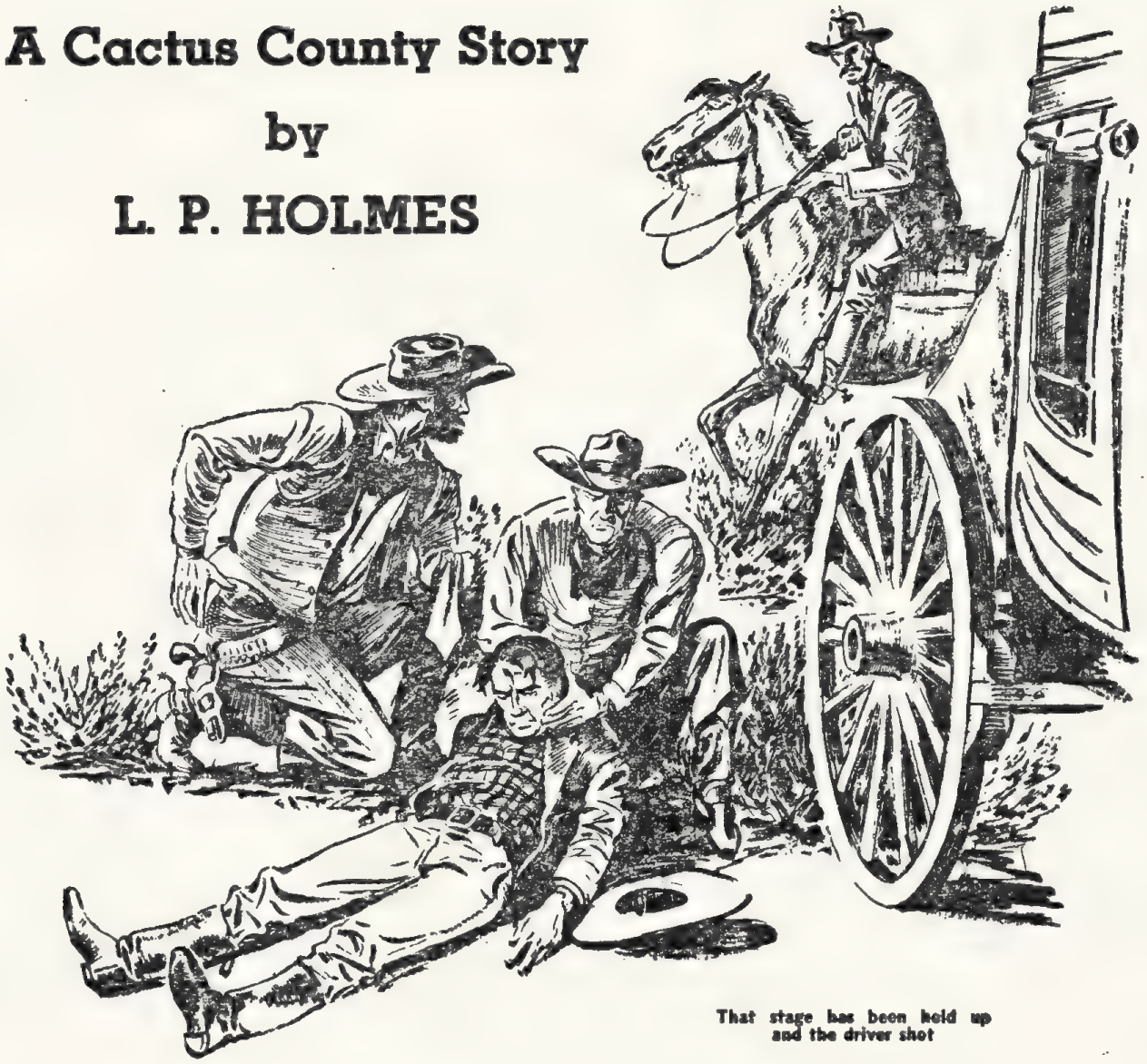
The Polite Bandit joined the Confederate army in 1862 and is believed to have died in battle.

—*Simpson M. Ritter.*

A Cactus County Story

by

L. P. HOLMES



That stage has been held up and the driver shot

A stage coach robbery proves that Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly are—

NOBODY'S GOATS

I AND PUGGY JIMPSON and Shoo-fly Davis is hunkered down comfortable in the shade out back of High Pockets Magee's livery barn, watchin' High Pockets an' Jake Pickle chuck themselves a game of horse shoes. We is feelin' plumb happy an' contented, figgerin' that as long as we're more or less outa sight there ain't much chance of Bosco Bates spottin' us an' thinkin' up some dang chore for us to do. But we soon finds we ain't foolin' ol' Bosco none whatever.

Bosco, he's Cactus County's big rough an' tough sheriff an' when he sets out to find anybody, he finds 'em. So he finds us. Mebbe he knows what's goin' on in our minds, for he sorta scowls down at us, which scowl right away gives Puggy the fidgets.

"Howdy, Bosco," chirrups Puggy, bright an' cheerful like. "Grab yoreself a chunk of shade an' watch this brawl. Things is

gettin' plumb interestin'. Ol' Jake was way behind jest a lil' while ago, but he's foamin' along now like a bear with a kink in its tail."

"Huh!" grunts Shoo-fly. "Yuh're plumb wrong there, Puggy. Bears ain't got no tails."

"Right now we ain't interested in bears," growls Bosco. "But we is in bulls."

"Bulls!" exclaims Puggy. "What bulls?"

"A couple of them white face thoroughbred bulls of Buck Kyle's," informs Bosco. "He's sold 'em to Bill Chaney over in Poison Water County an' he wants you three jiggers to deliver 'em. So shake a leg an' git on out to Tepee headquarters."

Now I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we don't work regular for Buck Kyle. Fact is, we don't work regular for nobody, preferrin' to be free men without the yoke of no regular boss blowin' down our necks. Fat Willie Weehaw, who runs the general store in Cactus City, he claims we jest don't work—period! Which, gentlemen, ain't the exact truth. If'n fat Willie had said we was happier restin' than we is workin', he mighta been shootin' closer to center. But then, Willie is allus blackguardin' I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, him bein' prejudiced agin us.

"Why don't Buck Kyle have some of his regular hands, like Skeet Mustang an' Lee Hanford deliver them bulls, Bosco?" asks Shoo-fly. "They savvy bulls better'n us fellers."

"Buck's got his own reasons fer wantin' you hairpins for the chore," sez Bosco. "An' them reasons is good enough fer me. So git up off yore lazy ends an' light a shuck."

NOW I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we've found by sad experience that it don't pay to argue with Bosco Bates. Comin' off second best in a argument with Bosco is jest as shore as death an' taxes. So we shuffles our weary bones erect an' goes into the stable to saddle up our broncs.

"Wisht I knew how come ol' Bosco found us so easy," snarls Shoo-fly. "Bet Willie Weehaw told him where we was. Someday I'm gonna git me a big plenty of that bumblin' tub of lard an' when I do I'm gonna spread him around somethin' scandalous."

Fat Willie is Shoo-fly's pet peeve in life. They've tangled four-five times already, Shoo-fly an' fat Willie has. So far she's about an even stand-off. For while Willie'd make about three of Shoo-fly in heft, he's plenty slow an' ponderous, whilst Shoo-fly, bein' a scrawny lil' runt, can skitter around like a flea on a hot griddle.

"I ain't worryin' none about fat Willie," sez Puggy, anxious like. "I'm worryin' about this Poison Water County. I've heard tell about that neck of the woods. Folks over there has got the reputation of bein' sudden and direct in more ways than one. Here's somethin' mebbe you fellers don't know. There's been more fellers lynched in Poison Water than any other county in the state."

"What of it?" snorts Shoo-fly. "Nothin' fer us to worry about. To git hisself lynched, a man has to do somethin' that calls for lynchin'; sech as cow stealin' or bank robbin' or things like that. An' speakin' personal, I don't aim to steal no cow critters or rob no banks."

"Well, fer gosh sakes, neither do I," sez Puggy. "Jest the same, I never could see no sense in takin' unnecessary chances. Yuh want to remember that lynchin' fever is a lot like the hickory heaves, it's plumb ketchin'. An' human nature bein' what it is, a jigger who's once lynched hisself a man, can easy figger how he could do a smoother job next time, an' so git to yearnin' for another chance to try his hand an' prove it. So me, I likes to be around folks who never git stirred up with lynch rope fever."

Well, we rams along out to Tepee headquarters where Buck Kyle takes over an' gives us our instructions, plenty definite.

"I'm rememberin'," sez Buck, "the good job you three boys did in bringin' in that thirty head of saddle broncs I bought from Charley Stewart over at Long Bend awhile back. That's why I picked yuh for this chore. But here's somethin' to remember. You ain't gonna be chousin' a couple of fifteen dollar mongrel cow critters across the hills. These two bulls is worth money—plenty! So you handle 'em easy an' gentle. I'm the gent who's payin' yuh wages an' if it takes yuh a week to git them bulls into Bill Chaney's corral, I won't kick—jest so yuh get 'em there in good shape."

It ain't so bad, once we git started. Them bulls peg it along, easy an' slow an' I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we don't hurry

'em none. We figger that if'n we put in a week doin' this, then that's one week of time when Bosco Bates won't be breathin' down our necks thinkin' up other, an' mebbe worse chores for us to do.

This Poison Water County lays plumb on the other side of the Piney Hills, but we don't try an' take them bulls across the Pineys, which'd mean plenty tough goin' in spots. Instead, we swings clear around the north end of the Pineys an' she's jest one week to the day after leavin' Buck Kyle's Tepee layout that we drifts them bull critters into Bill Chaney's corral.

BILL CHANEY looks them bulls over, admits he's plumb happy with 'em an' invites us to stay the night an' grub with him. Which we is happy to do an' she's a plumb pleasant evenin', what with Bill totin' out a jug of real passable drinkin' likker.

Next mornin', when we is ready to start back home, Shoo-fly gits hisself an idee. An' right there is where I an' Puggy makes a big mistake. We listen too long to Shoo-fly's idea an' lets ourselves be persuaded agin our better judgment.

"This is the fust time we ever been in this Poison Water County," orates Shoo-fly. "An' as long as we is here, we orter see more of it than we have. Somethin' to tell the boys about when we git back home. Nothin' broadens a man like travel does. Besides, I never did like to backtrack. We kin ride ourselves considerable of a circle, grub an' bed down for the nights at different outfits along the way.

"After, we kin cut back across the Piney Hills by way of Hunchback Pass an' come in by Johnny Longo's place, which'll give us a chanct to see our lil' Honey Bee girl an' sample some more of her swell cookin'. Likewise an' besides," he adds sly-like, "whilst we is lookin' over Poison Water County we won't be in Cactus City, with Bosco Bates thinkin' up misery jobs for us to do. What say, Ike?"

Now me, Ike Ferris, I got a streak of the explorer in me. The more I thinks over Shoo-fly's plan the better it sounds, particular that part about stoppin' in at Johnny Longo's, seein' Honey Bee an' takin' on a meal of her cookin'. Honey Bee is Johnny's wife, Ruth, an' a extra special favorite of mine.

So I agrees with Shoo-fly an' there ain't a thing Puggy kin do but string along. So we sets out to have a look at this here Poison Water County an' test its flavor.

Well, gents, we find out a coupla things right away. Poison Water is one dang big country an' its flavor ain't what you'd call rich an' hearty. At that, Bill Chaney done us a dirty trick. He coulda warned us, but he didn't.

I'm tellin' yuh that I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we travels two full days after leavin' Bill Chaney's ranch without seein' a single human soul or cuttin' the trail to a ranch headquarters where we coulda rounded up a coupla square meals. Which fact puts the pinch on us, an' no foolin'! Goin' without four or five meals in a row affects us the same as it would anybody else. About now we is plumb ravenous an' kinda peckish in the disposition.

"Know'd it," mumbled Puggy Jimpson. "Know'd we git ourselves a peck of misery rammin' around this fool Poison Water County. Gonna see the world, we was. An' what do we see? Nothin'. Jest country, plumb empty. Jest one rollin' hump after another, with nothin' in between but a holler makin' ready fer the next hump. Here we is, plumb lost, with nothin' to eat an' me ganted down so I'm plumb sway-backed."

"Huh!" snorts Shoo-fly. "Nobody ever gits swaybacked from bein' leaned down a mite. Humans an' four-legged critters git swaybacked from bein' pot bellied. Do yuh good to lose a pound or two."

"'Zat so!" snaps Puggy. "You mind yore lip, Mister Davis, or I climb off'n this bronc of mine an' plumb unshuck you. If'n I an' Ike hadn't listened to yore wise idee we wouldn't be starvin' to death right here an' now." Puggy, who really likes his victuals, is real peevish about now from not havin' any.

I speaks up to head off any argument. "Nothin' to do but jest keep travelin'. A man keeps rammin' along on a straight line far enough, he's jest mortal bound to git somewhere."

WHICH we does. Out in that backyard of nowhere we comes to a road, a plumb dusty road, which showed it was used regular. Big trouble was, which way was we to travel that road to git somewhere quickest? Whilst we is try-

in' to sort this problem out, Shoo-fly lets go a sudden yelp.

"Looky yonder! Here comes a stage. Knew durned well we didn't have nothin' to git so excited about. Ol' stage driver will point us the shortest way to grub."

Shore enough, way out there an old Concord thoroughbrace stage is rollin', headin' our way. It's about half a mile down road an', jest as we see it, drops down off'n one of them rollin' humps an' outa sight in the next holler.

Shoo-fly looks at Puggy, plumb triumphant. "What d'yuh think now, Mister Jimpson?"

"I'm still starvin', Mister Davis," comes back Puggy. "An' I still say yore idee about seein' the world is plumb locoed."

"Shut up, you two," sez I, plumb impartial. "An' quit snarlin' this 'Mister' stuff back an' forth. I'm plumb ashamed of both of yuh. Long as there's a stage comin', we're all right."

"Must be a plumb wide holler that stage dipped into," sez Puggy, more pleasant like. "She ain't showin' agin, yet."

We kept waitin', gettin' more restless all the time. But that cussed stage don't show again nohow.

"Mebbe," sez Shoo-fly, kinda thoughtful, "there was a branch road in that holler which the stage turned into. We better scatter over there an' ketch up."

Which we does. We gig our broncs an' ride right smart. We top the roll of country where the stage ought'r have come across. There ain't no side road down below, but there's the stage, pulled kinda half off the road an' standin' still. There ain't no driver on the box, but there is a feller layin' in the road by the off front wheel of the stage.

"Now that," sez Shoo-fly, "is a durn queer state of affairs. Yuh think, Ike, that mebbe that driver mighta gone weary all of a sudden an' decided to catch hisself forty winks?"

"Yore guess," sez I, "is as good as mine, Shoo-fly. I jest can't figger that."

About then a fat ol' Papajo Injun squaw comes rattlin' out of the stage an' sorta scuttles here an' you, aimless like.

"I got a feelin', boys," Puggy sez, plumb solemn-like. "It ain't a good feelin'. Somethin' tells me if we is smart we light a shuck outa this chunk of country jest as fast as the good Lord an' willin' hoss flesh will carry us. For whilst we was waitin' for that yonder stage to come on up over this hump, I thought I heard somethin'. That somethin' was plenty faint and muffled, but it sounded like a shot. That jigger down there by the stage ain't sleepin'. He's been plugged!"

Plumb abrupt, I gits what Puggy is drivin' at. Likewise Shoo-fly. That stage has been held up an' the driver shot. It's a picture which puts the creeps up Ike Ferris' spine, I'll tell a man.

"The runnin' idee," sez Shoo-fly, plumb quiet an' sober, "is a plumb practical one. But there's times when a man's pride won't let him run. Like now. We ain't done nothin' to run for. An' that jigger yonder in the dust may be still alive an' needin' help. Let's git down there."

Shoo-fly don't wait for no answer, but gigs his bronc into a run. An' whilst I an' Puggy would have felt better was we to be headin' the other way, there ain't a thing we can do but foller Shoo-fly.

We gits up to mebbe a coupla hundred yards of the stage, the Papajo squaw sprints back to the stage an' scrambles in. As we ride up close we kin hear her yelpin' an' whoopin' to herself. She sounds scared, an' plenty!

SHOO-FLY drops off an' kneels by the jigger in the road. "Shot, all right," he reports. "Creased across the skull plenty mean, but he ain't daid. Gimme a hand with him, Ike. Puggy, you make peace talk with that squaw an' see can she quiet down enough to tell us which is the closest place to where, around here."

I gits down an' helps Shoo-fly tie somethin' around that stage driver's head. Puggy, he leans in the stage door an' tries to talk sense to that spooked squaw. And it's because we is all so busy doin' these good deeds that we don't hear or see the two hombres who come ridin' up quiet on us, until they is plumb close. Then we sees and hears plenty, for one of them hollers, rough an' sudden.

"Git yore hands up! Make any phony moves an' yuh git blowed plumb apart at the belt buckle. Quick! Git yore hands up!"

I swings around an' finds myself lookin' into the muzzle of a Winchester rifle which had a bore that looked as big as the smoke stack on a steam enjine. Behind it

was a hatchet faced bee-head with a look in his eye mean enough to cut barbed wire. So I don't argue. I hists my hands high and quick. I notice something. This jigger with the rifle is wearin' a deputy sheriff's badge.

So's the guy with him, an' this 'un has a six shooter in each fist, covering' Shoo-fly an' Puggy.

Puggy don't argue, neither. He jest gulps an' reaches for the sky. Shoo-fly, him with as hair trigger a temper as I ever saw in a man, specially when he's bein' pushed around, gits his hands up slow and reluctant.

"What's the big idee?" he wants to know. "We happens along an' see this pore feller layin' in the dust with the top of his head nigh shot off, so we aims to help him. Now you two bee-heads come rammin' in all rough an' tough, throwin' guns on me an' my pals. It ain't a very nice business."

The feller with the two six-guns don't say a word. He jest gigs his bronc close in, reaches out an' slams Shoo-fly across the head with the barrel of one of his guns. Shoo-fly, he jest kinda melts down into the dust an' stays there, limp an' still.

Gentlemen, Ike Ferris makes no claim to bein' a hero or to ownin' more'n a reasonable share of nerve. But right about now I sees red. Trouble is, while I'm seein' red I'm also seein' the muzzle of that over-sized rifle, lookin' me square in the eye. I realize I can't do no good for Shoo-fly by gettin' myself killed, so I holds on to my mad. I looks this feller over who'd buffaloed lil' Shoo-fly. I looked him over good, so I'd remember.

He's built plenty stout an' he's got a head as round as a punkin, with pale eyes an' a mouth an' nose all funny lookin' an' pushed together. He glares back at me an' growls, "Let that be a lesson to yuh. Any back talk an' you git the same. Line up yonder, you an' you!"

He's speakin' to I an' Puggy, so we lines up. Punkin Head, he reaches inside the stage an' hauls out the Papajo squaw, starts askin' her questions. There's jest one thing she can say, an' she sez it over an' over again.

"Three men—three men—"

Punkin Head looks at Hatchet Face.

"Three men," he sez. "An' these are the three, shore enough. Lucky we was ridin' this part of the range. Ain't every day yuh can pick up three stage robbers, hot off'n the griddle. The folks in Hangtown will shore be interested in lookin' over these prize jingos. Let's tie 'em up."

WHICH they does, an' stacks us inside the stage, along with the wounded driver. The Papajo squaw they make git up on the box with Hatchet Face, who drives the stage. They ties our broncs behind the Concord and we go rattlin' off.

Puggy is groanin', soft an' low. "Yuh heard 'em, didn't yuh, Ike? Yuh heard what they called this place they're takin' us to? Hangtown. An' this is Poison Water County where they lynch more folks than any other county in the state. Oh, Lordy—Ike—I'm skeered, I'm skeered!"

"So'm I, Puggy," I admits. "Wish't we'd never left Cactus City. I do, for a fact."

There's a wiggle an' a squirm an' durn me if it ain't Shoo-fly, pushin' up from under an' scroogin' his way around until he can look out the stage winder. He's bleedin' a mite from where Punkin Head gun whips him, but there's also a sort of general all-over look about him that'd make any sane man stop, look and listen. For I want to say that whilst Shoo-fly Davis is a lil' man, he's quite a lil' man, if yuh get what I mean.

"Keep yore daubers up, fellers," he sez, quiet an' plenty cold. "We has walked or rode into somethin', for a fact. But we're a long way from bein' three dead Injuns. There's a smell about this business that's way off color, an' mebbe we can do somethin' about it, yet."

Puggy wants to know what he means by that kind of hopeful talk, but Shoo-fly don't say no more. He jest keeps watchin' outa that stage winder an' by an' bye I see his eyes sharpen up an' see him sorta nod to hisself as though he'd jest saw somethin' he was more'n half way expectin' to see.

This Hangtown is about as mean an' miserable a lookin' village as I ever throwed an eye across. Right out in the middle of nowhere, kinda sprawled an' straggly an' shiftless lookin'. But I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we don't have much time to see things. We is yanked outa the stage, untied an' hustled into this jail.

It ain't near as good a lookin' jail as the

one in Cactus City, which I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly knows plumb familiar. An' the dirty blankets on the bunks look like they shore got plenty of livestock in 'em.

By this time there's another of these jiggers with a deputy sheriff's badge on. This third feller, he's purty enough to be a girl, for a fact. He's got curly yaller hair, rosy cheeks an' nice white teeth. But his eyes is so pale they look like skimmed milk.

"So yuh caught 'em cold, eh fellers?" sez Purty Boy to them other two. "Caught 'em right in the act?"

"We did yuh know," sez Hatchet Face. "Right in the act. But they slickered us on one thing. They'd already hid out Tom Hanscom's mine payroll money. We got to notify Tom Hanscom right away an' see what he wants us to do with these no-account stage robbers."

"Fellers," sez Puggy. "You got I an' Ike an' Shoo-fly all wrong. We didn't rob no stage. Somebody else did."

Hatchet Face, he drops a hand to his gun an' snarls, mean-like. "Lyin' won't do you no good. We caught yuh cold, an' that's that. Give me any back talk an' I shore comb yore hair with the barrel of this gun."

With that they backs out, slams the door an' locks it. Live stock or no live stock, Puggy slumps down on one of them dirty bunks, plumb discouraged. Feelin' mebbe twict as low as Puggy, I picks me a bunk, an' durn the live stock. Shoo-fly finally does likewise, but not until he's sorta prowled this jail from end to end an' looked everythin' over, even the rafters an' the roof. We is so plumb disconsolate we can't think of a single word to say.

IT'S around the middle of the afternoon when we lands in this Hangtown jail. Jest before sundown there's a key rattlin' in the lock an' here comes Hatchet Face an' Punkin Head an' Pretty Boy again an' with 'em is a big, burly gent with a black beard, a cold eye an' a voice like a grizzly bear growlin'.

"Me," he sez, "I'm Tom Hanscom. I got me a gold mine out at Box Elder Gulch an' I got twenty-thirty men out there who expect to git paid a coupla months back wages tonight. The money to pay 'em was comin' in on Buff Purcell's stage. You three jiggers stole that money. What did yuh do with it?"

"Mister," I sez, plenty polite, "Yuh got us wrong. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we never held up no stage or stole no money."

"Lyin' won't do yuh no good," rumbles this Tom Hanscom. "I jest come from talkin' to Buff Purcell, who's got his wits back again. Buff sez he's bringin' the stage along, smooth an' easy back the road a piece when all of a sudden, there's three riders cuttin' in on him. They is all masked with bandannas. Buff says he was reachin' for his sawed off shotgun when, whamo!—one of them three cuts down on him an' his head seemed to explode.

"But Buff is ready to swear there was three of 'em. That Papajo squaw, she's plumb scairt into fits, still—but she keeps sayin' 'three men—three men'. An' now, as I count yuh over, you is three men. So you ain't foolin' nobody. What did yuh do with that money?"

"What money?" asks Puggy. "I an' Ike an' Shoo-fly, we ain't seen no money. We ain't robbed no stage. We ain't done anythin'."

"Yuh see, Tom," puts in Punkin Head. "They figger to lie out of it, jest like I said they would."

This Tom Hanscom nods, an' glares at I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly. "I ain't aimin' to argue with yuh now," he sez. "I'm goin' out to the mine an' tell my men what happened to their pay roll money. They ain't gonna like it a bit. They'll be comin' in to town tonight an' I'll be with 'em. We'll be bringin' three nice new ropes, cut jest the right length an' already noosed, an' you three hombres will tell us where that money is or we stretch yore necks 'til they pop. In these parts we have special rope medicine for stage robbers an' such. We is, in fact, plumb proud of our reppytation for handlin' galoots like you."

With that, him an' the other three go out an' leave us to our misery. Puggy he caves in on a bunk again.

"Knew it," he moans. "Knew we'd git ourselves into a peck of misery rammin' around outside our own clover patch. Poison Water County—Hangtown—an' they're comin' tonight with three special cut ropes, with the nooses already tied. Ike, we is gone roosters. We is, for a fact."

I gotta admit, gents, that Puggy seemed

to have all the brands read right. I can't see a lick of daylight nowhere. Right about now I'm feelin' low enough to walk under the belly of a rattlesnake in a wagon track.

Up to now Shoo-fly ain't said a word, which ain't at all like Shoo-fly, him bein' plenty peppery an' full of fight, most generally. But all of a sudden he ketchs fire. He stares at the door them other jingos had gone out of an' he lets out a snarl.

"So! Aimin' to make I an' Ike an' Puggy the goats fer somethin' we never did, are yuh? Well, lemme tell yuh somethin' my fine feathered friends, you is bitin' off a chaw of poison yuh're gonna choke on. I an' Ike an' Puggy, we ain't nobody's goats. Me, I got the picture figgered out to the last frazzled end an' from now on things is gonna happen."

GENTLEMEN, they does. Shoo-fly sits down, yanks off'n his boots. Then he's up again, stretchin' his arms like he figgers to tear somebody plumb apart.

"Ike," he raps. "Git up off'n that bunk an' gimme a lift."

"Lift," I sez, "what kind of a lift an' where to?"

"Up on yore shoulders, of course. Puggy, you give Ike a hand in gittin' me high enough to reach the roof of this hen coop they call a jail in this measely town. Hurry up, you fellers, time's awastin'."

Me, I can't figger jest what that lil' beehead of a Shoo-fly has got on his mind, but he's able to think, seems like, while I an' Puggy ain't. So I staggers up an' with Puggy helpin', git Shoo-fly up so he kin stand on my shoulders.

"Swell," chortles Shoo-fly. "Jest right. Now, Puggy, when I wrastles a shake off'n this roof an' hand it down, you hide it under a bunk. An' they calls this a jail! They'd orter come to Cactus City an' take a look at a real jail. Mebbe they will, if'n we bait the trail real careful. A'right, Puggy—here's the first shake."

An' durn me for a sheepherder if it wasn't. They's a squeakin' an' a scratchin' up above an' Shoo-fly hands down a shake.

"What'cha doin', Shoo-fly?" mumbles Puggy. "Aimin' to make a hole for 'em to drop us through when they stretch us?"

"Naw!" pants Shoo-fly. "I'm openin' a hole so I can git outa this monkey cage. Here's 'nother shake. Couple more an' I'll be able to wiggle out."

"You aimin' to leave I an' Ike to stretch alone?" asks Puggy, plumb alarmed. "Now, Shoo-fly, you wouldn't do that to yore ol' pals, would yuh?"

"'Course not!" snaps Shoo-fly, plumb impatient. "Don't be so cussed iggerant. I know what I'm doin'. You jest leave the runnin' of this lil' soiree to yore friend Shoo-fly. He wa'nt born last night. There! Now I kin git out. Hand me up my boots an' a blanket to stuff in this hole. An' keep yore shirts on. I'll be back by an' by."

Well, sirs, we hears the roof creak a little while Shoo-fly is slidin' down it. We hears him hit the ground outside. And then we don't hear nothin'. An' is it a lonesome feelin'!

By now dusk has settled in plumb thick. I an' Puggy we jest sit an' wait, wonderin', mostly wonderin' if'n Shoo-fly'll ever come back.

He does. Mebbe it's half an hour after he leaves that Shoo-fly comes scramblin' back into the fold. We hears him scratchin' up onto the roof an' then there he is, danglin' in the rafters an' stuffin' the blanket into the hole again, so starlight won't show through. I helps him down.

"Shoo-fly," said Puggy, real heartfelt, "you is a true pal. You came back to be stretched with I an' Ike."

"Ain't none of us gonna be stretched if'n you an' Ike keeps yore mouths shut an' do jest as I say," Shoo-fly tells him. "Now spraggle down an' act like you is plumb heartbroke. I think I heard them three slickery coyotes comin' to take another look at us."

Shore enough, we ain't hardly settled down on them bunks then the door is unlocked an' there is them jiggers, Hatchet Face, Punkin Head an' Pretty Boy, leerin' at us through the light of a lantern which Pretty Boy is packin'.

"Jest wanted to see if yuh're plumb contented," sez Hatchet Face. "Yuh got anythin' to say—like tellin' us what yuh did with that money? Last chance before the stretchin' crew arrives."

Puggy stirs a mite. "We could do with a bite of grub," he suggests, timid-like.

"Grub!" Hatchet Face laughs, mean as any laugh I ever heard. "You won't be interested in grub or nothin' else an hour

from now. In these parts we never feed stage robbers. We jest stretch 'em!"

SATISFIED we is all present an' accounted for, they goes out and locks the door again.

"Meanest jiggers I ever met up with," mumbles Puggy, plumb dismal. "Aim to starve us as well as stretch us."

Shoo-fly, he ain't dismal. He hops up, spry as a cricket. "A'right, fellers. We is now leaving' this house of durance vile, as the poet feller sez. Gimme a hand up. Puggy, you'll be next an' then we'll haul Ike up."

"Yuh think it's safe, Ike?" asks Puggy, plumb anxious.

"Safe!" snaps Shoo-fly. "What in Tophet is the matter with yore brains, Puggy? Anythin's safer than waitin' around here to be stretched. Shut up an' do as yuh're told."

Coupla minutes later we is all three squattin' on the roof of that there jail, lookin' over this village of Hangtown. Right now that town has got a growl to it, like there is a lot of mad gents gettin' together to pull off a stretchin' party.

"We got to light a shuck," sez Shoo-fly. "That neck stretchin' mob'll be headin' this way any second, now. Yuh jiggers foller me. Come on!"

Shoo-fly slides down an' drops off'n the jail roof. I an' Puggy follers along, real pert. Shoo-fly takes off at a run an' we pounds along behind. We is headin' out toward the edge of town an' purty soon we is at a corral where some broncs is.

"Them's our broncs," sez Shoo-fly, softlike. "An' there's our saddles on the fence. Ike, you an' Puggy git them broncs dressed an' ready to go whilst I take care of another lil' chore. I won't be long."

With that Shoo-fly slides off into the dark an' I an' Puggy we ketches an' saddles. Now that we got saddles to sit in an' willin' hossflesh to pack us, they ain't nothin' I an' Puggy craves to do so much as puttin' all the distance we can between us an' this dang village of Hangtown. We is plumb impatient for Shoo-fly to show up.

"Ike, I is gettin' the fidgets plumb awful," mumbles Puggy. "I'm yearnin' to split the wind like she was never split before. Where in blazes is that lil' hooty-corn of a Shoo-fly, an' what's he holdin' up this footrace for? Ain't he got no judgment a-tall?"

About then, here comes Shoo-fly, scuttlin' through the dark. He's luggin' somethin' over his shoulder, which he sets to tyin' across the back of his saddle.

"What'cha got there?" Puggy wants to know.

"Bait," pants Shoo-fly, finishin' his tie an' swingin' into his saddle.

"B-Bait!" stutters Puggy. "What fer? We ain't aimin' to go fishin'. Leastways, Puggy Jimpson ain't. Puggy Jimpson is right now due to leave these parts like his shirt tail was on fire."

"Start leavin'," was all Shoo-fly sez. "I an' Ike is with you. That neck stretchin' mob is right now headin' fer the jail house. Yeah, start leavin'."

GENTLEMEN, WE DOES. We not only leaves, but we keep on leavin'. We rams across country all night long, with Shoo-fly takin' the lead. Come mornin', there's the good ol' Piney Hills, liftin' out ahead.

"Good ol' Pineys," sez Puggy. "Purtiest hills in the world, them Pineys is. An' the country t'other side of 'em is my idee of heaven—good ol' Cactus County. Far as I'm concerned, they can' give this Poison Water County an' all that's in it, plumb back to the Injuns."

Shoo-fly, he's lookin' back over his shoulder, an' now he nods, plumb satisfied-like. "Here they comes," he sez.

I an' Puggy snaps our heads around, plumb instanter.

"Here comes who?" I asks.

"Them three slickery jiggers, Purty Boy, Punkin Head an' Hatchet Face. An' one other jigger who I hopes is that mine owner, Tom Hanscom," sez Shoo-fly.

I an' Puggy strains our eyes. Shore enough, way out there on our back trail, so far away they is jest lil' dots, is four riders. Puggy shifts nervous in his saddle.

"What we waitin' around here for? Let's flit."

We does, but not too fast. Shoo-fly won't let us. An' when we starts hittin' into the Pineys durned if'n Shoo-fly don't deliberate lay a trail where it can be easy read and follered.

"You plumb loco, Shoo-fly?" demands Puggy. "What's the idee of layin' out so plain a trail? I thought the idee was to

get shet of them jiggers back there."

"Bait—an' a trail to foller," sez Shoo-fly. "That's the proper caper. Jest leave this to me. I know where I'm headin'."

Which the lil' bee-head does, all right. For in time we get plumb across the Pineys an' is back in our own clover patch once more, good ol' Cactus County. Right away, now we is on our ol' stampin' grounds, I an' Puggy git to feelin' plumb stout an' mean again.

"Me," sez Puggy, "I'd jest as soon stop right here, wait for them Poison Water County jiggers an' then kick their cussed teeth out. Teach 'em not to mistreat decent Cactus County folks."

"Save yore smoke," sez Shoo-fly. "Mebbe yuh'll git that chance, later. Right now we is shaggin' it along to Cactus City."

Which we does. By this time I figger we has gone without grub for so long we is amblin' skeletons. Anyhow, we is plumb ravenous an' the minute we hits Cactus City, I an' Puggy make a bee-line for Sing Low's Chiny hashhouse, aimin' to shore clean up the pantry.

But not Shoo-fly. He heads for Bosco Bates' office. I an' Puggy, we ain't hardly got started appeasin' the wolf that's in us when here comes Bosco Bates after us.

"Git over to my office an' stay there," orders Bosco. "I mean now! You can eat for a week, by an' by. Scatter!"

PUGGY an' I knows better'n to argue. We lines it for Bosco's office, where we finds Shoo-fly. Bosco comes in an' sez, "Line up again that wall yonder, you three an' let me do the talkin'. Get set—for here they come!"

Shore enough, here comes Hatchet Face, Punkin Head an' Purty Boy, along with that mine owner feller, Tom Hanscom. They looks considerable the worse for long ridin', an' plenty tough. They spots the sign over Bosco's office door an' they comes in, walkin' stiff an' tough.

"Somethin' you jiggers want?" asks Bosco. "I'm Bates, sheriff of Cactus County."

Hatchet Face spots I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, scowls savage-like. "Yeah, sheriff," he raps. "We wants them three stage robbers. We is obliged to you for arrestin' 'em for us."

"Must be some mistake," sez Bosco, easy-like. "Them three ain't stage robbers. They is three friends of mine who wouldn't rob a watermelon patch. You gents must have yore robbers mixed up."

"Mixed up, nothin'!" shoots back Hatchet Face. "We caught 'em cold, robbin' Buff Purcell's stage after havin' near killed Buff. An' they got away with Tom Hanscom's payroll money."

Bosco bends a cold eye on Hatchet Face. "How come you was so handy to that stage robbery, Mister—you an' yore feller deputies? Was this holdup pulled in yore back yard? Howcome that feller yonder"—Bosco points to Purty Boy—"howcome he didn't move in with you other two to arrest Ike an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly? Why did he ride back to this here Hangtown off to one side of the stage road, with that sack of money tied behind his saddle?"

Bosco points to a tight stuffed canvas sack layin' in a corner of the office. I an' Puggy recognizes it as the sack Shoo-fly brought all the way from Hangtown, tied to his saddle. This Tom Hanscom gent stares plumb bug-eyed and bewildered.

"Why—," he gulps, "that's my payroll money."

"Exactly!" snaps Bosco. "An' Shoo-fly found it under one of the bunks where these three tin-horn deputies hole up in Hangtown. I understand there was a Papajo squaw on that stage who kept sayin' 'three men—three men'. An' the stage driver, once he gets over that slug crease on the head, he says the same number. All right, mister—count them tin horn deputies in front of you. Three of 'em, ain't they?"

Then Bosco makes a fast move an' his gun is out, coverin' them three jingos with the deputy badges.

"Reach!" he growls. "Or I blows yuh in half! This lil' soiree ends up with three stage robbers after all—and this time the right three. Reach!"

Them jiggers don't argue, Bosco havin' that gun an' that look in his eye. They reach, snarlin' an' cussin'.

"Shoo-fly," sez Bosco. "Move around an' take their hardware."

Which Shoo-fly does an' as he stacks the shootin' irons in a corner he sez, "Remember yore promise, Bosco."

"Sure," sez Bosco. "Have at him!"

Shoo-fly struts up to Punkin Head.

"You is the jigger who gun-whipped

me, remember!" he sez, "Well, now!" An' with that Shoo-fly tees off an' wallops Punkin Head on the nose with everything he has. Then he goes after his man like a flock of bob-cats.

Bosco looks at I an' Puggy. "What you two waitin' for?" he sez.

I AN' Puggy git the idee, instanter. I ties into Hatchet Face an' Puggy he pounces on Purty Boy. Gentlemen, she is quite a roundelay, but when it's over, we got them three plenty subdued, if yuh get what I mean. Then we chucks 'em into Bosco's jail an' Bosco locks the door, solid. An' I an' Puggy an' Shoofly know by experience that them three jiggers will stay put in that jail, for she's a real calaboose.

This Tom Hanscom gent is nestlin' that bag of money in his arm an' grinnin' plumb apologetic like.

"Sorry I had the wrong slant on you fellers," he sez, plumb handsome about it. "To make things right I'll be happy to buy four or five drinks, all around—if yuh're interested."

If we is interested!

We heads for Tug Stevens' Oasis Bar almost at a run. Puggy drops a hand on Shoo-fly's arm. "Shoo-fly, you is the smartest lil' bee-head I know. Where'd yuh git all them answers which yuh musta told to Bosco?"

Shoo-fly spit past a swole up lip he'd got in the fracas jest past.

"I jest used my eyes an' my ears an' my knowledge of human nature," he sez, modest-like. "I knew we didn't rob that stage, but somebody musta. An' when I follered that trail down, I jest hadda come to the right answer. So then I set about to bait 'em an' lay a nice fat trail for 'em to foller us back to here. I told Bosco all about it an' he set a trap to gobble 'em up. Which is all they is, 'ceptin' that I an' you an' Ike, we don't aim to be nobody's goats —not ever."

An' I leave it to you gents, if we was.

When a wagoneer's war rages on the Western plains, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk bring their guns to bear on a three-cornered feud between freighters, Indians and settlers, facing desperate odds as they battle to bring peace and understanding in—

TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES

An Exciting Action Novel

By

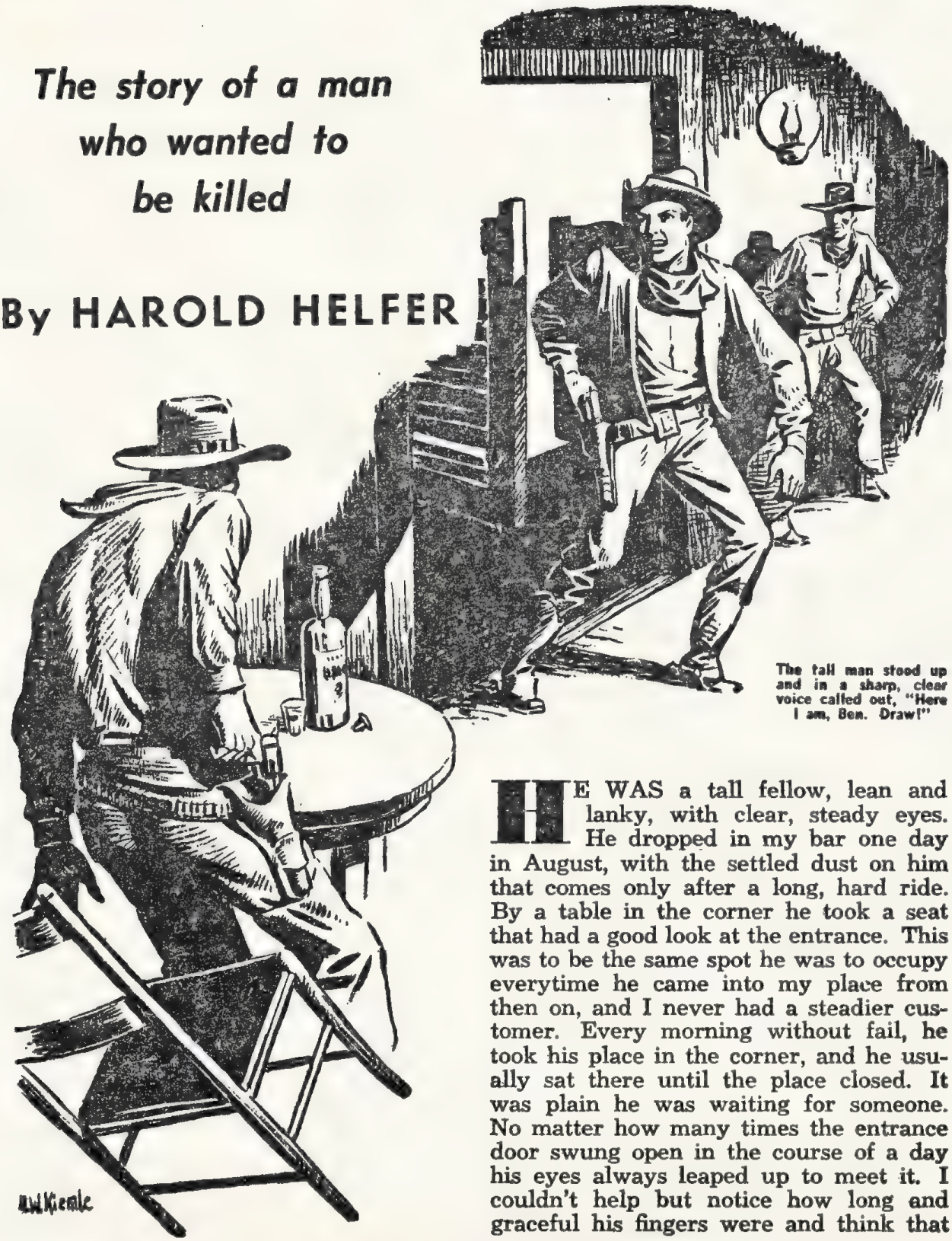
WALKER A. TOMPKINS

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE—PLUS MANY OTHER STORIES AND FEATURES!

EXPIATION

The story of a man who wanted to be killed

By HAROLD HELFER



The tall man stood up and in a sharp, clear voice called out, "Here I am, Ben. Draw!"

HE WAS a tall fellow, lean and lanky, with clear, steady eyes. He dropped in my bar one day in August, with the settled dust on him that comes only after a long, hard ride. By a table in the corner he took a seat that had a good look at the entrance. This was to be the same spot he was to occupy everytime he came into my place from then on, and I never had a steadier customer. Every morning without fail, he took his place in the corner, and he usually sat there until the place closed. It was plain he was waiting for someone. No matter how many times the entrance door swung open in the course of a day his eyes always leaped up to meet it. I couldn't help but notice how long and graceful his fingers were and think that

it wouldn't take them long to get to the six-shooter by his side.

He never had much to say to anybody around the place. He just sat quietly at his corner table, playing solitaire and drinking. He drank steadily but always kept himself under control—or, anyway, almost always. Every once in a while he would wave for me to have a seat by him. Maybe it was that he just got lonely; or maybe it was that he had let his drinks slip up on him; or it may have been a little of both. Anyway, the times I sat down by him he did talk to me in little chunks.

The first time he invited me to sit down by him I remember he said, "I want you to hear me out; I've got a theory. Now the West is a big place. You could spend all your life going around looking for someone, especially if that someone was on the move. You might miss him in town by five or six hours, or you might miss him just a matter of minutes by a turn of a trail, and the next week you're a thousand miles away from each other.

"But now listen to this—one of the two men doesn't keep gyrating around. He stops dead in his tracks. Then, if the other one keeps on the go, he will sooner or later come to where the still one is. See what I mean?"

No matter even if he did seem to me to have had too much to drink the lean stranger's eyes never failed to go for the front door whenever it swung open. And whenever that happened his eyes would take on a flashing glint.

Sometimes he would put away his cards and spend hours just gazing at the entrance and then his eyes would be deep and brooding.

I guess it was about a month after he showed up that he first mentioned Julie. "She had hazel eyes and dark silky hair," he said to me that first time. "She was soft and warm, Julie was, the loveliest flower on the whole prairie."

He kept on talking like this about Julie, never saying too much at any one of my infrequent sittings by him, but always in a sort of poetic way.

THEN one evening after he waved me down by his table he said to me, "I'm going to tell you a story. There were two fellows and there was a girl. Her name was Julie and they all grew up together. Julie was like the dawn, fresh and beautiful and full of promise, and both men looked upon her as his and both men wanted her. But they both couldn't have her, she had to choose between them, and she did. Julie and the man she chose and the other one of the threesome drifted apart—it was best that way—but the one that didn't get Julie was bound to look upon her forever as someone to protect and cherish.

"The fellow Julie chose turned out to have a wild streak in him. He drank a lot and he was too fond of cards and he became irritable and mean at times. One night he came home liquored up after losing all his money, and when Julie wept he got mad and kicked her down a flight of stairs and she just lay there. Maybe it was a broken heart, maybe it was the blow of the fall, but she was dead."

JUST then the front door swung up and the tall stranger's eyes, smoldering more darkly than I had ever seen them before, jumped up to meet it. His lips were pressed so tight all the blood was drained out from them.

A lonely Indian had come out of the cold and my companion at the corner table was soon relaxed again.

He downed another jigger and said, "Well, except for a few more lines, that's the end of the story. The man Julie chose rode out into the night. Now bring me another drink."

That was the only time he ever told this story, but I felt uneasy sure enough from then on whenever any stranger stepped into the place. And then one night toward the end of November it happened. The door swung open and a blond, chunky man strode in.

The tall man by the corner table stood up. In a sharp, clear voice he called out, "Here I am, Ben—draw!"

There was a blaze of fire.

When the smoke cleared away, it was the blond, chunky man who remained standing.

It left me shakey—and surprised. Somehow I had taken it for granted all the time that the tall man would win out. I guess that's the way I had wanted it to turn out, and my face must have shown it. Because the lanky stranger, looking

up at me with a smile around the crinkle of his eyes, said with his last words, "Oh, don't feel so bad. The story ended like it should. Julie's been avenged."

I wasn't quite sure what he meant until I found out a little later that the tall stranger never had carried any bullets for his gun—and that he'd left a written request in his pocket that he be buried by his wife, Julie.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 7)

and took possession of the country for the United States. The coming of the railroad in 1879 opened up this vast territory to the world and development was swift, with the result that in 1912 New Mexico became a state.

There are about eighteen different places in the state where there are now Indian pueblos. Some thirty years ago I used to go out to the pueblos on the Isleta Indian Reservation, near Los Lunas, about twelve miles south of Albuquerque and watch the Indian horse races. Many of the cowboys of that section of the country who had fast horses would go out and match races against the horses of the Indians, and would sometimes wager fair sized sums of money on the outcome of the races, but they were beaten by the Indians' horses more often than they were able to win, the Indians proving that they were excellent judges of horses.

Rugged Terrain

New Mexico's boundaries enclose more than 122,000 square miles of rugged terrain, towering mountains, fertile valleys, sweeping plains and sage dotted mesas. There are few states with as great an appeal to the vacationist, the sportsman, or the casual tourist, for the state holds a unique position in that here may be found some of the few remaining wilderness areas in the United States, where nature remains in virgin form, and where transportation is limited to horseback and foot travel. Here can also be found some of the finest seasonal big game hunting and fishing in the country.

The rugged range of the Rocky Mountains

[Turn page]

"Saved my Life"

'A God-send for GAS-HEARTBURN"

When excess stomach acid causes painful, suffocating gas, sour stomach and heartburn, doctors usually prescribe the fastest-acting medicines known for symptomatic relief—medicines like those in Bell-ans Tablets. No laxative. Bell-ans brings comfort in a jiffy or return bottle to us for double money back. ©

BELL-ANS for Acid Indigestion 25c

THE BIGGEST SELLER IN 29 YEARS!

BUILD YOUR OWN LOCAL SHOE-BUSINESS

Commissions to $3.00 per Pair PLUS CASH BONUS

WRITE FOR FREE CATALOG

Make money with famous 29 year old company. Sell complete line quality shoes for men, women, children. Smash hit styles with heel-to-toe CUSHION are selling dynamite. No experience or investment needed. Actual shoe samples supplied without cost. Write TODAY for full information and FREE 52 page Catalog.

TANNERS SHOE CO., 509 BOSTON 10, MASS.

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

LAW STUDY AT HOME for Business Success and LARGER PERSONAL EARNINGS. 40 years expert instruction — over 114,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payment plan. Send for FREE BOOK NOW — "Law and Executive Guidance." G.I. APPROVED

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW

Dept. 19-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

Take This Easy Step To

BIG MONEY!

Sell CHRISTMAS CARDS

Plastic Cards for Christmas and Everyday. Also lovely EMBOSSED Christmas Cards WITH NAME. Sell themselves at 50 for $1.25, up. Amazing $1 "Southern Beauty" Assortment of 21 Christmas Cards pays you up to 60c! Complete line of fast-sellers. Write for Samples on approval. SOUTHERN GREETING CARD CO., 216 South Pauline Street. Dept. C-64, MEMPHIS 4, TENN.

OWN a Business

Clean and Mothproof rugs and upholstery "in the home." Patented equipment. No shop needed. Duraclean dealer's gross profits up to $20 a day on EACH serviceman. These Nationally Advertised services create repeat customers. Easy to learn. Quickly established. Easy terms. Send today for Free Booklet—Full details.

DURACLEAN CO., 9-690 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Ill.

Be an INVESTIGATOR

JAMES S. BOLAN, FORMER POLICE COMMISSIONER OF NEW YORK CITY offers MEN & WOMEN an attractive opportunity to prepare for a future in *Investigation & Criminology* by comprehensive Home Study Course. Free placement service assists graduates to obtain jobs. APPROVED UNDER G. I. BILL OF RIGHTS. Write for Free Booklet A.

THE BOLAN ACADEMY, INC.
EMPIRE STATE BLDG., NEW YORK 1, N. Y.

extends across New Mexico. Seven National Forests cover most of these elevations, whose slopees nuture clear, rushing streams. In summer this is the camper's and angler's paradise, and in winter it is just as popular with the skiers and those who go in for winter sports.

The magnificence of the Carlsbad Caverns can hardly be described. This is the world's largest explored system of caverns. Here the visitor may spend hours in an underground wonderland where man-made trails wind among formations that have been millions of years in the making.

There are so many interesting sights, so many interesting places one could visit in New Mexico, that a lifetime would hardly be long enough to see it all. One spot that always intrigued me is Magdalena, about 17 miles west of Socorro. Its altitude is nearly 7,000 feet. The town was founded in 1884 by miners who worked small claims in that section. The railroad came soon afterward and the town flourished, money was free and easy, liquor was abundant, and it was a typical western or mining boomtown, although on a small scale, and not tough enough to gain a wide reputation like some of the western mining towns.

Cattle and Sheep Country

When mining declined in or around Magdalena, the town declined too for a time, but then it turned to livestock and flourished again. There is a great cattle and sheep country around that section of New Mexico and as there is no other railroad station between Magdalena and Arizona it is quite a trading and shipping point. The town was named for Mary Magdalene, and the cause of it being so named is a great growth of evergreen trees or large shrubs upon the side of a mountain that is otherwise devoid of vegetation, and this group of small trees, which is perhaps 400 feet in diameter, forms a perfect profile of Mary Magdalene.

It is said that the Indians used to come and hold some kind of ceremonial and so worship this profile picture upon the side of the mountain. It can be seen for miles.

Three Towns in One

A very quaint and interesting town of the state is Taos. It is in reality three towns—the Spanish town, Don Fernando de Taos, the Indian pueblo San Geronimo de Taos, and the old Indian farming center Rancho de Taos.

In the vicinity of these three villages are other smaller settlements from one to five miles apart, all properly members of the Taos community, representing extensions of Spanish colonization in the middle of the eighteenth century. The section, now simply called Taos, lies close against the base of a part of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains which rises abruptly east.

Visitors enter Taos over highways through beautiful canyons, but whether they enter the plateau through the Cimarron Canon with its pine trees, its eastern approach or through the Rio Grande Canyon with its huge igneous rock cliffs, its southern portal, the ascent affords a thrilling adventure, and the first impression upon emerging onto the plateau is that of the freshness and purity of the rarefied atmosphere. The clearness of the light makes all colors pure and luminous, and there is an air of quietness with the little villages lying peacefully, seemingly asleep, the tall, blue mountains, screen-like, behind them.

In appearance like scattered stones carelessly thrown at the foot of the mountain backstop are the light colored adobe houses. More straw is used in the adobe construction than elsewhere, giving the houses a golden glint in the sunshine.

Exciting Contrasts

In the plaza in the heart of Taos, the light skin of the English-speaking residents, the dusk of the soft-spoken Spanish, and the blanketed bronze of the Indian prove exciting contrasts in the brilliance of the New Mexico sun. Occupying today the spot around which the first settlers built their homes, the plaza is still the center of communal life, and the oldest walls of the earliest houses are now hidden behind modern buildings.

The citizens have had the wisdom to preserve the architectural traditions of the village, to keep the walls of their houses low and the roofs flat, to use native materials, adobe and crude pine beams. Consequently, Taos is distinctive, its buildings and dwellings almost uniformly appropriate to the land, and the beauty which nature has bestowed is only occasionally marred or spoiled by extraneous architectural intrusions.

Life was not always serene in Taos, as it was once the meeting place of hunters and trappers. The covered wagons of trail days would rumble in to be greeted by the cheers of the villagers, who were noted for their hospitality, their fandangos, and their brew of raw whiskey, called "Taos lightning." This brand of refreshments often put rugged men into a fighting mood and there were often many altercations.

In 1837 the Alcalde (Mayor) was arrested on some trival pretext and imprisoned by the Mexican Government. All the town rose to arms and marched upon Santa Fe. The government, caught off its guard, was ready to agree to anything. At the instigation of Manuel Armijo, a leading politician, the insurgents elected as governor an Indian from the Taos pueblo, but Armijo quickly shot him and stepped into office.

Then at the outbreak of the Civil War, it was hard to tell whether the sympathies of the populace were with the Union or the Confederacy, but Kit Carson and some of the citizens nailed the Union flag to a pole

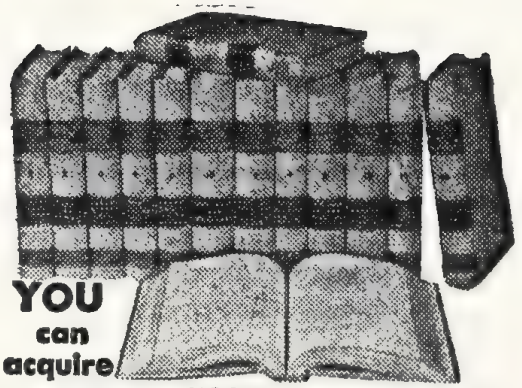
[*Turn page*]

America's Most

ENTERTAINING

Picture Magazine!

NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS
ONLY 15c PER COPY



YOU can acquire

LAW NIGHTS AT HOME! L L.B. DEGREE

LaSalle's famous Law Library—used as reference in many Law libraries and Law offices—has enabled thousands to master Law surprisingly fast, in spare hours at home, for business and professional advancement.

These 14 remarkable volumes, compiled by leading professors and lawyers, cover the whole basic field of Law in condensed, orderly, simplified manner.

You advance rapidly with this great library, plus special lectures furnished. We guide you step-by-step with personalized Problem Method of instruction . . . you *learn by doing*—handling legal problems—not by memorizing rules.

Send for two FREE 48-page booklets, "Law Training for Leadership," and "Evidence," answering questions about Law and its value to you, and telling how LaSalle Law graduates are winning rapid advancement in business and public life. Mail coupon below. No obligation.

LA SALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution

417 S. Dearborn St. Dept. 10329-L Chicago 5, Ill.

Send me your two FREE booklets described above, without obligation.

Name.....*Age*.....

Street.....

City, Zone & State.....

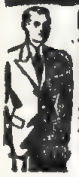
INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure "Patent Guide" together with "Record of Invention" form—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
98-K District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

MAKE THIS **SUIT YOURS** NEW PLAN

EARN CASH SHOWING TO FRIENDS!



Write at once if you want this fine made-to-measure suit! You can get it by taking a few orders from friends, and earn up to $10, $12 in a day. Your bonus suit helps you take more orders with latest style, made-to-measure guaranteed suits at amazingly low prices. Also complete line of Ladies' Tailored Suits. No experience, no money needed. Write TODAY for FREE SAMPLES—telling about yourself—age, etc. No obligation!

PIONEER TAILORING CO. Congress and Throop Streets, Dept. X-1277, Chicago 7, Ill.

NEW! ADVERTISING MACHINE

PRINTS & ILLUSTRATES
PENNY POST CARDS

Easy to boost sales with *Cardmaster*. Thousands are doing it. Not a toy but a sturdy Advertising Machine *Guaranteed 5 years*. Get money-making facts today. Act now!

FREE An Illustrated Book of New Plans, Business Getting Ideas for your own business. Get it.

CARDMASTER, 1920 Sunnyside, Dept. 4510, Chicago 40

CREATE AT WILL

SELF-REALIZATION offers a system for the harmonious and full development of BODY, MIND and SOUL. Teaches how to CREATE AT WILL what you need through a definite, simple technique for contacting the Omnipresent Source of Infinite Power within you.

FREE BOOKLET: "Highest Achievements through Self-Realization"

Registrar T.M.
SELF-REALIZATION FELLOWSHIP
3880 SAN RAFAEL AVENUE
Los Angeles 31, Calif.

FREE BOOK

RAISE HAMSTERS

The new wonder animals from Syria. Often called Toy Bears. Delightful pets. Everyone wants them. Laboratories need thousands. Clean, odorless. Raise anywhere. A profitable and interesting hobby or business. We furnish breeders and instructions. Write today for free book.
GULF HAMSTERY, 1537 BASIL ST., MOBILE, ALA.

Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 882-C FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N.Y.

LEARN HOW TO HYPNOTIZE

Amazing self-study lessons . . . in simple, easy to understand language. How to select a subject—how to hypnotize by telephone—**how to make money** from hypnotism—mental telepathy—stage hypnotism—self-hypnosis; how modern hypnotism is used to conquer inferiority complex, fear, battle fatigue, timidity, etc. Clear helpful pictures show operating positions, movements. Money-back guarantee. Only $1.95, postpaid—or COD, plus postage. Write today!
Nelson-Hall Co., 1139 S. Wabash Ave., Dept. K-6, Chicago 5, Ill.

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:

Cluthe Sons, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

in the plaza and stood by for a while to see that it stayed there, and that seemed to settle the matter.

The Kit Carson House

One of the principal places sought out by visitors and tourists in Taos is the Kit Carson House. It is situated on Kit Carson Avenue, and is a part of a group of buildings built around a patio. The house which is labeled the Kit Carson House is now owned and used by the Masonic Lodge. From 1858 to 1866 this house was Kit Carson's headquarters, office, and home. Carson lived in the rooms in the back of the patio and used the front for offices and commissary. There is also a Kit Carson cemetery where the famous old scout and guide is buried.

It is strange how tragedy will mark a spot and make it of interest to tourists or travelers, but there are two other places in Taos that hold much interest seemingly to travelers and one of them is the Manby House, not historically connected with the early days of the town, but as the home of the late A. R. Manby, an English eccentric and adventurer who came to Taos in 1894. His decapitated body was found in his house on the evening of July 3rd, 1929. The incident stands today as one of Taos' unsolved murder mysteries.

The other point of interest caused by a tragedy is the former home of Governor Charles Bent, where he was scalped during the insurrection of 1847. His family escaped by digging through the adobe wall to the house next door.

With all its grandeur of scenery, its rugged mountains, its rolling plains, its deep canyons, its romantic history, New Mexico, a land of enchantment, has been the gigantic stage upon which a man played out the drama of his own destiny. His name will live on, songs have been written about him, a halo has been clasped upon his scapegrace brow.

The boy who never grew old has become a sort of symbol of frontier knight-errantry, a figure of eternal youth riding forever through a purple glamour of romance, and although many may forget historical facts told them about points of interest in New Mexico, they will not forget the tales told of New Mexico's Robin Hood of the range, "Billy The Kid."

Well, cowhands, I guess this is trail's end

for this trip, but be around when we saddle our mounts again and start on another trail jaunt. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES is the Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk novel which Walker A. Tompkins has contributed for the November MASKED RIDER. It is a strong historical novel which involves in addition to Morgan and Blue Hawk, a family of fine old pioneers, as well as lawmen, townsmen, Shoshone Indians and rival freighters.

To us any story built around the frontier freight outfits has a good chance of being fascinating. What is it that gives them their distinctive flavor? Perhaps different things to different people, but to us it is a combination of things. Whether oxen, horses or mules, whether the long wagon train of a big company or a one-man outfit, there was an air of romance and adventure surrounding the whole business with its far-flung stations, the individuality of its personnel, the nature of its activities.

There is a great misconception about teamsters and mule-skinners to the effect that they are loud-mouthed, cursing characters whose ability to handle stock is measured by the size of their vocabulary of cuss words and the skill with which they can combine them. Like most popularly accepted ideas there is some slight basis for truth in it because for lack of better help, freight outfits often had to hire irascible men whose chief interest in mules was as an outlet for their bad tempers. Such men naturally attracted attention to themselves and established a traditional character for the whole breed.

The fact is that men who handle stock have to be exceptionally quiet, calm and patient. You'll find that men who have worked most of their lives around stock seldom raise their voices, and practically never make a sudden move around their charges. They love them, take good care of them and in return get co-operation and a good day's work, and a good deal of genuine affection. These men are the ones in demand for teamsters. They bring their animals back in good shape from a long trip in addition to making better time than the roughnecks.

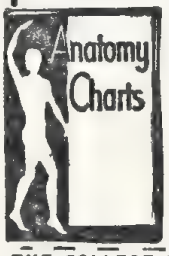
[*Turn page*]

Learn this Profitable Profession

IN 90 DAYS AT HOME

MONEY-MAKING CAREER OPEN to MEN and WOMEN, 18 to 50

Hundreds of men and women between 18 and 50 make $10 to $20 in a single day giving Scientific Swedish Massage and Hydro-Therapy treatments. There is big demand from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums and clubs. Graduates earn large full time incomes from these or in private practice in their own offices. Others make good money from home treatments given in spare time. Learn this interesting, money-making profession in your own home, through our home study course. Same instructors as in our nationally known resident school. You can win independence and prepare for future security by qualifying for our Diploma. Course can be completed in 3 to 4 months. Many earn while they learn. Begin your training at once.



Anatomy Charts & Booklet FREE

Enroll now and we will include, at no extra cost, many needed supplies. Fit yourself to help meet growing demand for Scientific Swedish Massage. Send the coupon at once for complete details. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Booklet. FREE, postpaid.

THE COLLEGE OF SWEDISH MASSAGE
Dept. 963-M, 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11, Illinois
Please send me FREE and postpaid, Anatomy Charts, 32-page Booklet and complete details on Home Training.

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

DOES GARLIC RELIEVE GAS?

ALLIMIN relieves distressing symptoms of heaviness after meals, belching, bloating and colic due to gas in stomach and intestines. ALLIMIN has been clinically tested by doctors and found highly effective. ALLIMIN is the largest selling garlic tablet in the world. Only 69c at drugstores.

ALLIMIN Garlic Tablets

Here's a Profitable BUSINESS FREE

MONEY MAKING OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU WITHOUT INVESTMENT

No experience needed to act as our Local Dealer for MASTER Work Uniform garments. Every business concern a prospect. Advertising embroidered on garments is a big sales feature. Easy, pleasant work. You receive cash commissions daily. You can easily earn up to many thousands of dollars per year. We supply all Sales Equipment FREE. Write

GEO. MASTER GARMENT CO., Dept. 363
Ligonier, Indiana

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

SELL SUPERIOR UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

Build Steady Repeat Business
No Investment—No Experience.

UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

direct from America's Largest Exclusive Union Label Book Match Manufacturers. We feature PETTY Glamour Girls, Scenics, handsome Dog series and NEW AD-DISPLAY DOUBLE BOOK MATCHES. Make BIG PROFIT QUICK. Write Today for SPECIAL OFFER and FREE POWERHOUSE selling kit.

SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-109, 7528 S. Greenwood, Chicago

If You Get Up Nights

TRY THIS FREE

If your sleep is disturbed by getting up many times at night due to irritation of Bladder or Urinary Tract, try PALMO TABLETS at our risk if you have never used them. All you do is simply test 20 Tablets FREE from the Full-Size Package we send you. If palliative relief doesn't surprise and delight you, return extra tablets and you pay nothing for the trial. SEND NO MONEY. Mail name and address today and we will send your PALMO TABLETS by return mail postpaid. For Adults Only. Address —

H. D. POWERS CO.

Dept. 10-24 Box 135, Battle Creek, Mich.

STOP FOOT PAINS

OR NO COST!—Try Dr. Barron's GENUINE Foot Cushions for quick foot relief! They take painful pressure off callouses, corns, sore heels, aching arches — absorb foot shocks, help support weak arches. Light, ventilated, spongy. LIKE WALKING ON A PILLOW! Wear in any shoes. Dr. Barron says: "Relieves tired, aching feet from heel to toes." Send only $1.98 for A PAIR, or C.O.D. plus postage. State shoe size and if man or woman. 30-DAY TRIAL GUARANTEE. Money back if no blessed relief!

ORTHO, Inc., 2700 BROADWAY, Dept. 210M, N.Y.C. 25

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. **Sent on Trial!** Write NOW for free Booklet and **Proof of Results.** All correspondence confidential.

Brooks Company, 183-D State St., Marshall, Mich.

GET READY TO LIVE!

Will you gamble 1c to win happiness, bigger income, love? Why accept fear, uncertainty, shyness, miserable lacks? "Plenty for All Who Use Secrets of NATURLAW," is theme of inspiring 16-page book, MOUNTAINS OF GOLD. It's FREE! Win your share of life's good thru NATURLAW. Send name to

INSTITUTE OF NATURLAW, Dept. T34G09, 2208 Main, Dallas, Texas

---

DO YOU WANT TO **STOP TOBACCO?**

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

35 Years in Business
300,000 Satisfied Customers

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

Send for this FREE BOOK on

RHEUMATISM

ARTHRITIS • NEURITIS • SCIATICA

If you suffer the agonizing pains of these diseases when the usual remedies have failed, learn about a specialized system proven for treating. This marvelous treatment is completely explained in the Ball Clinic's **FREE BOOK.** *No Obligation. Write Today.* **Ball Clinic, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.**

The good skinner must also have an eagle eye for detail. He must never overload, must have the load properly balanced, must see that axles are properly greased, harness intact and properly fitted individually to each animal to avoid collar galls, netfasts, and other injuries and discomforts to his team. He must be sensitive to their physical condition, watch their feet, baby them when they are ailing.

Freighting can be fun, like camping out or a picnic. There were men that made it a way of life. We knew of one outfit in Montana owned by a single man who lived entirely with his outfit. Sometimes strung out with trailers, he'd hitch up thirty-six horses in pairs. He bred his own replacements, and the colts traveled right along with the outfit. Home for this man was wherever he had a hauling job.

Though a freighter had to be always alert the job made for time to think, relax, and live slowly and fully, to savor all the pleasures of life in the open. Many freighters had a very philosophical turn of mind, and found ther lives the best possible.

But in the earliest days when the business was building up it had its dangers and tribulations. Humans being in some ways the least rational representatives of the animal kingdom, and one of the few species that will habitually go out of its way to start a fight, what might have been a peaceful settlement of the West was accompanied by war both between the settlers and the Indians and among the settlers themselves.

In TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES both elements are combined in their ugliest aspects with Indians fighting Indians, palefaces fighting palefaces, different groups of white men and Indians fighting each other. Such a state of terror and confusion certainly required the intervention of a man of almost superhuman attainments, and it was lucky that Wayne Morgan happened to be in the Snake River country at the time. Otherwise there is no telling what might have happened. It is even possible that the various warring elements might have completely annihilated each other.

How he straightened out the situation is the story and we'll leave you to find out about that in next issue in Walker A. Tompkins' stirring novel of freighters, Indians and settlers! Look forward to it. It's a grand fiction treat.

In addition, the next issue will contain its

usual quota of carefully selected short-stories and features. Can't help saying we think this will be one of the best issues yet. The Masked Rider certainly never rode through a stronger saga of Western action than TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES!

LETTERS FROM READERS

COME one, come all, and send in your opinions, comments and suggestions to this department. Every letter and postcard is welcomed, whether it carries a knock or a boost—so keep them rolling in. We'll start our selections from the mailbag this time with a lengthy and very interesting missive. Here goes:

Am a steady reader of your magazine. But do the writers of the stories ever talk to the painters of the pictures on the cover of the book? In the story the Masked Rider wears a cape, black hat and mask. But on the cover he wears only a mask and a white hat.

Inside the book they say Wayne Morgan is a twin gunman and has two holsters and two belts, and yet both on the cover and in the illustrations he has one gun holster and belt. And on the cover he has an empty holster on one hip and a gun in the off-side hand. Don't tell me he's a cross-draw hand or he lost his gun because the holster is pointed the wrong way and in a holster like that he couldn't lose the gun.

[*Turn page*]

Three Great Action Novels of the Fighting West!

HOPALONG CASSIDY AND THE EAGLE'S BROOD
By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

TEXAS OR HELL
By WES FARGO

BUCKSKIN BRIGADES
By L. RON HUBBARD

All in the October

TRIPLE WESTERN

Now on Sale—25c at All Stands!

calling all
ADVENTURERS

Would a real vacation interest you? A trip around the world? Big Game Hunting? Game Fishing? Sailing? Dude Ranching? YOU NAME IT!!

HAVE YOU BEEN POSTPONING YOUR DREAMED OF VACATION FROM YEAR TO YEAR FOR LACK OF FUNDS?

15 years ago the founders of "VAGABONDS UNLIMITED" set out to PROVE that wonderful vacations NEED NOT COST MUCH MONEY. They traveled around the world several times, hunted Big Game, Fished, Sailed, Skied, etc. - - - and PROVE it they did. Now this amazing secret of vacations at your own price is being offered to all sincere seekers of adventure, travel and recreation. Become a member of the fraternity of WORLD Travelers and Vacationists. Send $1.00 to VAGABONDS UNLIMITED today and start off on this new and different approach to a fascinating life. Address:

VAGABONDS UNLIMITED
210 Fifth Avenue, New York City 10, New York

LAW STUDY AT HOME for Business Success and LARGER PERSONAL EARNINGS. 40 years expert instruction — over 114,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payment plan. Send for FREE BOOK NOW — "Law and Executive Guidance." G.I. APPROVED
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 19-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!"

Help Bring Crooks to Justice Through Scientific
CRIME DETECTION!
We have taught thousands this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let us teach you in your own home. Learn Finger Printing, Firearms Indentification, Police Photography, Secret Service Methods thoroughly, quickly, at small cost. Over 800 of all American Bureaus of Identification employ I. A. S. students or graduates. We can prepare you for this fascinating work, during spare time. Write today, stating age, for "Blue Book of Crime."
INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7967 Chicago 40, Ill.

START YOUR OWN BUSINESS ON CREDIT
Always your own boss. 1554 Dealers, sold $5,000 to $26,500 in 1948; their average $6,742. We supply stocks, equipment on credit. 200 home necessities. Sales experience not needed to start. Wonderful opportunity to own pleasant, profitable business backed by world-wide industry. Write RAWLEIGH CO., Dept. J-U-TFG, Freeport, Ill.

AMAZING We guarantee you $50.00 for selling 100 boxes 21 for $1 Xmas cards; also 50 and 25 for $1 with name on; also Napkins and Stationery. No experience needed. Costs nothing to try. Samples and Selling Plan on approval.
MERIT
370 Plane Street Dept. O Newark, N. J.

"Studio Starlet"
Handkerchiefs
Beautifully drawn illustrations of Models, every one different, skilfully done on full-size quality handkerchiefs—will NOT wash out. For the artist in your soul . . .

All three
$1.00 ppd.
NO STAMPS
TORRANCE NOVELTY CO.
Box 597 Waldwick, N. J.

Dangers Of Delay On Chronic Ailments

FREE BOOK — Tells How To Help Guard Health

Many facts about colon disorders, headaches, constipation, nervousness or stomach, liver and bladder conditions are explained in a new 40-page FREE BOOK. Write today. Thornton & Minor Hospital, Suite 1056, Linwood at Harrison, Kansas City 3, Mo.

SUIT YOURS AS A BONUS

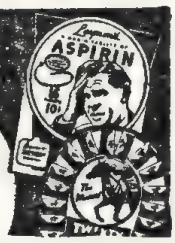
AND BIG MONEY IN SPARE TIME, TOO

We want you to wear this fine made-to-measure suit! Make it yours by sending a few orders, & earn BIG CASH PROFITS in spare time. Your suit will help you get more orders with scores of rich, quality fabrics, tailored-to-measure to newest styles. Also Ladies' Tailored Suits—complete line. Write today for **FREE SAMPLES** NO EXPERIENCE, no money needed. For quick action tell us about yourself.

J. C. FIELD & SON, INC.

Harrison and Throop Sts. Dept. X-1877, Chic. 7, Ill.

Store Route Plan PAYS BIG MONEY



SELL COUNTER CARD PRODUCTS

Build a good-paying business of your own. Call on dealers of all kinds; show nationally-advertised Aspirin, Cosmetics, Razor Blades and 200 other necessities. Big 5c and 10c retail packages, high quality. Attractive counter displays sell goods fast. Free book gives amazing facts. Write!

World's Products Co., Dept. 73-Y, Spencer, Ind.

TRAIN

Your VOICE!

Results GUARANTEED

STRENGTHEN your voice this tested, *scientific* way. Yes—you can now build yourself a POWERFUL speaking or singing voice in the privacy of your own room. Silent self-training lessons; no music or piano required. Just send your name for sensational details of this amazing course. I'll send you FREE a vocal mechanism chart. State your age.

Perfect Voice Institute, 1141 S. Wabash Ave., Studio K-6, Chicago 5, Ill.

BE GUIDED BY THE STARS

☆

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

APPEARS IN EVERY ISSUE OF

EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY

☆

Now on Sale—25c at all Stands!

In one story it is said that ten men knew the Masked Rider to be an honest man. Who are these men? In "Montezuma's Gold" it is stated that only Blue Hawk knew Wayne Morgan to be the Masked Rider. But there was an old Indian of Blue Hawk's tribe that knew it. What became of that old Indian?

Why don't Reese, Hatfield, Slade or Bob Pryor, who ramrod your magazines RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, TEXAS RANGERS, THRILLING WESTERN and THE RIO KID WESTERN, ever meet up with Morgan? Slade and Hatfield have more of a reason for not running across Morgan because they are permanent in Texas, but Reese and Pryor haven't much of a reason for not doing so. You told your readers that these men were smarter than the usual lawman. That makes no difference. They may be smarter than the usual, but that doesn't stop them from running across each other unexpectedly.

This is my idea of the best in Western novels:

MASKED RIDER WESTERN—Wayne Morgan novels.

TEXAS RANGERS—James Hatfield novels.

RANGE RIDERS WESTERN—Steve Reese novels.

THRILLING WESTERN—Walt Slade novels.

THE RIO KID WESTERN—Bob Pryor novels.

Wish your magazines came out more often.—*Bert Thomas, Marshall, Saskatchewan, Canada.*

Well, Bert, that's a good letter! Thanks for pointing out the discrepancies on the cover—but in most cases careful reading would reveal that the covers do fit the stories, and in other cases some changes are made on the covers for the sake of more picturesque presentation in color. We see you're a stickler for 100% accuracy, and we're going to try to please you. Let us know if we slip again.

Many men knew the Masked Rider as an honest man—but that does not mean they knew his identity. As for your other questions, we'll let some of the readers tackle them. Let's see how many of you have run across logical explanations for these things in your reading. Who'll be the first to clear up Bert's queries?

One thing we certainly do agree with, Bert. That is just because these famous lawmen are smarter than the average run is no reason why they shouldn't run across each other unexpectedly. Maybe some day they will. It's a round world and no man can keep going in a straight line indefinitely.

ENTERTAINING PUZZLES OF EVERY TYPE IN

VARIETY CROSSWORD PUZZLES

Now on Sale—25c at All Stands!

I thought I would write and tell you I really enjoy your magazine. Of all the Westerns I read, I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN best of all. Wayne Morgan and Hawk have become such good old friends of mine that I want them to keep going for a long, long time. I would miss them very much if anything should happen to them. So take good care of these two unbeatable trail *companeros.*

Yours for more Westerns. Wish you came out every two weeks.—*George Rider, Winter Haven, Florida.*

I sure do enjoy MASKED RIDER WESTERN. It sure is swell. I have been reading it and its three companion magazines RIO KID, TEXAS RANGERS and THRILLING WESTERN for three years regularly, and they sure are the best. The novel I liked best was THE GOLDEN SKULL by W. K. Thompson. He sure is a good writer. I never miss an issue. Best of luck.—*Paul Boyd, Morganfield, Kentucky*

My favorite magazine is MASKED RIDER WESTERN because your authors always have an exciting and believable story to tell. Keep up the good work.—*Edward Korskan, Philadelphia, Pa.*

Thanks, waddies. Sorry we haven't room to publish every letter that comes in. But let's hear from you all. Kindly address those letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y.

Just before signing off, I can't resist recommending to all you horse-lovers the swell new movie, "The Great Dan Patch," released by United Artists, in which Visalia Abbe, the 4 year old pacer of the Craig Cimarron Ranch, plays the famed horse "Dan Patch." Stars of the picture are Dennis O'Keefe and Gail Russell. A treat for everybody! So long, pards.

—THE EDITOR

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

TRAIL OF THE SHOSHONES

A Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

SCHOOLMARM DIVINE

A Cactus County Story by

L. P. HOLMES

Plus Many Other Stories and Features

AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL

SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of 4 Big, Thick Auto Books. 20th Edition. Over 2700 Pages! Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW
HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the JIFFY INDEX to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon TODAY.

CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

4 BIG, THICK VOLUMES

Over 2700 pp., 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge. *Publishers Since 1898*

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A-749
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.
I would like to examine your 4-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you $2 and pay the balance at the rate of only $3 a month until $24.80 has been paid. Include consulting service as offered above.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

High School Course at Home **Many Finish in 2 Years**

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H758 Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

OUTDOOR JOBS

Study for game warden, patrol, park and wildlife service exams. Write for details. DELMAR INSTITUTE C4, Denver, Colo.

AMAZING OFFER—$40 IS YOURS
FOR SELLING ONLY 50 BOXES CHRISTMAS CARDS

Also 50 and 25 for $1.00 with or without name. Free samples. Other boxes on approval, including entirely new, different deluxe assortment with feature television card. Cute plastic assortments. Write today. It costs nothing to try.

FREE SAMPLES

CHEERFUL CARD CO., Dept. AM-4, White Plains, N.Y.

BE A *Nurse*

MAKE $35-$45 A WEEK

You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates. 50th yr. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women 18 to 60. High school not required. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan. Write today.

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 4210, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.

Name.....
City.....*State*.....*Age*.....

GET THE New BILLY WEST COMIC BOOK!
The BEST IN WESTERNS... FOR ACTION! ADVENTURE! ROMANCE! HUMOR!
HOWDY, PARDNERS! I'M BILLY WEST... MEET MY FRIENDS, UNCLE DAN, MISS MOLLY SAGE, AND LITTLE JULIE AND SNUBBY SAGE!
WE HAVE LOTS OF EXCITING ADVENTURES WITH BILLY WEST! DON'T WE, UNCLE DAN?
YOU SURE DO! AND OUR READERS WILL TOO!
THAT'S NOT ALL, PARDNERS! YOU'LL WANT TO JOIN MY BILLY WEST COWBOY CLUB! JUST LOOK DOWN THERE AND SEE WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN!
THE BEAUTIFUL BILLY WEST COWBOY RING! IT'S ADJUSTABLE TO FIT YOUR RING FINGER!
A SWELL, FOUR-COLOR PICTURE OF BILLY WEST AND HIS HORSE, EAGLE!
THE BILLY WEST COWBOY CODE
HANDY WALLET-SIZE MEMBERSHIP CARD IN THE BILLY WEST COWBOY CLUB!
THE BILLY WEST COWBO
Welcome to my Club, Partner! Billy West
BILLY WEST on EAGLE
THE BILLY WEST SECRET COWBOY CODE — WHICH ONLY CLUB MEMBERS CAN READ!
Western Fun - Join Our Cowboy Club!
BILLY WEST
BUY THE NEW ISSUE OF BILLY WEST COMICS AND FIND OUT HOW TO JOIN THE BILLY WEST COWBOY CLUB! AND YOU'LL FIND PLENTY OF FUN AND ADVENTURE BESIDES!
BE SEEING YOU, PARDS!

NEED MONEY? HERE'S PLENTY!

I'll Put a "Shoe Store Business" in Your Pocket!

You Don't Invest a Cent! I Furnish Everything — FREE

In fact, it's *better* in many ways than a retail shoe store of your own! I plan to give it to you for absolutely nothing—FREE. You don't invest a penny, now or ever! Rush the coupon Today—*be in this splendidly profitable business next week.*

Yes, you can be the direct factory man handling the line of this 45-year-old, million-dollar company—the Leader in its field.

Here's WHY It's Better

Everybody wears shoes. You can start your business by selling a pair to your friend or brother, father or wife—even get a pair yourself. That will prove the fine quality leather—superb craftsmanship—money-saving value—and the unequalled comfort-fit!

Perfect fit for everybody because you draw on our huge inventory of 150,000 pairs, plus enormous daily factory production. You *always* have the exact size and width to fit your customers properly—no substitutions necessary.

Sales build up from friend to friend quickly, like a snowball. They build you a big income quickly with recommendations and repeat orders.

Fit Men and Women

You handle this superb line of dress, work, sport shoes for men and women. Scores of exclusive features. Leather jackets, raincoats, sport shirts—lots of *extra* opportunities for big profits.

BIG Profits — NO Overhead

You have none of the expense of rent, clerk hire, light, heat, etc. You invest nothing but your time. Your big margin of profit is all clear net to you.

Powerful National Advertising

You get the benefit of big, powerful ads in scores of magazines like The Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, etc. People *know* Mason—are eager to get the special Personal Fitting Service you offer. And remember, we pay for all this advertising—it doesn't cost you a cent.

NOW Is the Time

The people right around you are eager to have you demonstrate and sell them Mason's exclusive Zipper Shoes—no laces—special comfort features. Air Cushion shoes—superb FOOT PRESERVERS with extra support for weak feet. The best season is beginning—rush the coupon now.

EXTRA Advantages

If you act promptly, you'll get our great Free Sample Outfit that puts a "shoe store business" right in your pocket—you'll get the special sales training that 5,000 successful salesmen prepared for you—measuring devices—demonstrators — *EVERYTHING you need to tart making money the very first hour.*

Remember, Mason Shoes are backed by the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval—neither you nor your customers can lose a dime—and you have everything to gain.

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

ZIPS on—off

Top-Quality, glove-soft, with the Zipper everybody is eager for. It's included in your FREE Sample Outfit.

Leather Jackets

Tremendous demand for these fine leather jackets, at far-below-store prices. Included in your FREE Sample Outfit.

Velvet-Eez Air Cushions

Exclusive Air Cushion Insole cradles foot on 10,000 tiny air bubbles. Ten-second demonstration practically Guarantees sales.

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-273 Chippewa Falls, Wis.

RUSH THE COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-273, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Put me in a "shoe store business"! Rush me great FREE Sample Outfit featuring Zipper shoes, Air Cushion shoes, Leather jackets—other fast-selling specialties. Show me how your National Advertising makes more customers and profits for me. Send everything free and prepaid. (My own shoe size is.....).

Name.....

Address.....

Town.....State.....

I Will Train You at Home for Good Jobs in RADIO-TELEVISION

I Send You Many KITS OF PARTS for practical experience

You conduct many tests and experiments with equipment built from materials I furnish. Some of the equipment from my Servicing Course and some from my Communications Course is shown below. Everything I send is yours to keep.

America's Fastest Growing Industry Offers You GOOD PAY--SUCCESS

Want a good-pay job in the fast growing RADIO-TELEVISION Industry? Want a money-making Radio-Television shop of your own? Here's your opportunity. I've trained hundreds of men to be successful Technicians . . . MEN WITH NO PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE. My tested and proved train-at-home method makes learning easy. You learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. You get practical experience building, testing, experimenting with MANY KITS OF PARTS I send. All equipment yours to keep.

MAKE EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

The day you enroll, I start sending SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how to make $5, $10 a week or more EXTRA MONEY fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. From here, it's a short step to your own shop or a good-pay Radio-Television servicing job. Or be a licensed Radio-Television Operator or Technician.

TELEVISION OFFERS BRIGHT FUTURE

Today there are nearly 2700 Radio stations on the air—and within three years experts predict over 1000 Television Stations. Then add developments in FM, Two-Way Radio, Police, Marine, Aviation and Microwave Relay Radio! Think what this means. New jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

ACTUAL LESSON FREE

Act now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual lesson, "GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH RECEIVER SERVICING." It shows you that learning at home is easy, practical. You also get my 64-page book, "HOW TO BE A SUCCESS IN RADIO-TELEVISION." It tells what my graduates are doing and earning. Send coupon in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9K09, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

"Before finishing course, I earned as much as $10 a week fixing Radios at home in spare time. Recommend N. R. I."—S. J. Petruff, Miami, Florida.

"My first job was obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. Am now Chief Engineer, Police Radio Station WQOX."—T. S. Norton, Hamilton, Ohio.

"N. R. I. was my stepping stone from a few hundred to over $4,000 a year as a Radio Engineer. Make extra money servicing Radios."—A. B. Michaels, Trenton, Ga.

"I am operating my own Radio Sales & Service business. With FM and Television in the offing, we have a very profitable future."—A. Patrick, Tampa, Fla.

Good for Both-FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9K09,
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page book about How to Win Success in Radio-Television—both FREE. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

☐ Check if Veteran — Approved Under G. I. Bill

VETERANS GET THIS TRAINING WITHOUT COST UNDER G. I. BILL